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The Hudson Review

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TO OUR READERS

In our next issue, Autumn 1983, we will institute a new column called "From Our Readers," an expanded Letters to the Editors section. We welcome all letters concerning material in the magazine. At this time we are particularly interested in your opinions about the changes on the front cover and inside format which we have recently introduced.

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The Letters of Anthony Trollope

Edited by N. John Hall. This fully annotated two-volume edition makes available 1,830 letters—more than twice the number previously published—of Victorian England's busiest writer. In a manner that is straightforward and less consciously literary than that of most writers, these letters, though touching only obliquely on his inner life, reveal Trollope himself: honest, frank, blunt, crusty, gallant, playful, quick to take offense and quick to be reconciled, kind, generous, intelligent, and self-deprecating but with a strong belief in his own ability and worth. In sum, they clarify, supplement, and correct the crafted view of his life as given in his *Autobiography* and underscore the relevance of his private life to his published work. Trollope wrote some 70 books, and much of his correspondence is with publishers; indeed, a list of his publishers reads like a roll call of the great and not-so-great Victorian publishing houses. Trollope's letters to them add greatly to our knowledge of his own work and of publishing practices of the period. Other activities also generated illuminating correspondence—for example, his work for the Post Office, his service to the Royal Literary Fund, his editorship of *St. Paul's Magazine,* and his extended travels abroad. The two volume set, $87.50

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Michael Slater. "My father did not understand women," Dickens's younger daughter is said to have remarked, and despite the relish with which we enjoy such comic characters as Mrs. Gamp and Mrs. Nickleby, his seriously presented female characters have found few admirers. This study offers a major reevaluation of this aspect of Dickens's art, looking at his own experience of women—as son, brother, lover, husband, father—and the ways in which this experience found expression in his work. Drawing extensively on documentary evidence (much of it new) and the most detailed survey ever attempted of the women in Dickens's novels, the author presents a fresh view of Dickens's relations with women and his perception of female nature, and reveals a greater depth and subtlety in his treatment of women than he has ever been given credit for. Illustrated. About $28.50

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SEAMUS HEANEY

Station Island[1]

I

It was a close grey morning,
a reek of early summer
pith-life, rotted things,
reed-beds, thick young corn
hushed and water-blistered.

Something beat on iron:
a hurry of bell-notes
flew over sedge and iris,
an escaped ringing
that stopped as quickly

as it started. *Sunday*,
the silence breathed
and could not settle quite
for a man appeared
at the back of the hedge

with a bow-saw, held
stiffly up like a lyre.
He moved and stopped to gaze
at the shins of hazel trees,
then angled the saw in,

[1] Station Island is on Lough Derg in Co. Donegal in the northwest of Ireland. It is also known as St. Patrick's Purgatory because there is a tradition that the pilgrimage which thousands of people still do there every summer was established by the saint. It lasts for three days and involves fasting, praying barefoot around stone "beds" and various other penitential exercises which make up the "station." The nineteenth-century Irish novelist William Carleton wrote about it in his story "The Lough Derg Pilgrim." These are the opening sections of a longer poem.

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pulled back to gaze again
and moved on to the next.
"I know you, Simon Sweeney,
for an old Sabbath breaker
that has been dead for years!"

"Damn all you know," he said,
his eye still on the hedge
and not turning his head.
"I was your mystery man
and am again this morning.

Through gaps in the bushes
your First Communion face
would watch me cutting timber.
When cut or broken limbs
of trees went yellow, when

woodsmoke sharpened air
or ditches rustled
you sensed my trail there
as if it had been sprayed.
It left you half-afraid.

When they made you listen
in the bedroom dark
to wind and rain in the trees
and think of tinkers camped
under a heeled-up cart

you shut your eyes to see
a wet axle and spokes
in moonlight, and me
streaming from the shower,
headed for your door."

Sunlight broke in the hazels,
the quick bell-notes began
a second time. I turned
at another sound:
a crowd of shawled women

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were wading the young corn,
their skirts brushing softly.
Their motion saddened morning.
It whispered to the silence,
"Pray for us, pray for us,"

it conjured through the air
until the field was full
of half-remembered faces,
a loosed congregation
that straggled past and on.

As I drew behind them
I was a fasted pilgrim,
light-headed, leaving home
to face into my station.
"Stay clear of that procession—"

he was shouting angrily,
"Don't turn your back again.
Sooner or later, son,
you will have to face me
with both eyes open."

But the murmur of the crowd
and their feet slushing through
the tender bladed growth
was another scent picked up,
a drugged and open path

I was set upon.
I trailed those early-risers
who had fallen into step
before the smokes were up.
The quick bell rang again.

II

I was parked on a high road, listening
to peewits and wind blowing round the car
when something came to life in the driving mirror,

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someone walking fast in an overcoat
and boots, bareheaded, big, determined
in his sure haste along the crown of the road

and I somehow felt myself the challenged one.
The car door slammed. I was suddenly out
face to face with an aggravated man

raving on about lying listening for
gun-butts to come cracking on the door,
yeomen on the rampage, and his neighbour

among them, hammering home the shape of things.
"Round about here you overtook the women,"
I said, as the thing came clear. "Your *Lough Derg Pilgrim*

haunts me every time I cross this mountain—
as if I am being followed or following.
I'm on my road there now to do the station."

"O holy Jesus Christ, does nothing change?"
His head jerked sharply side to side and up
like a diver's surfacing after a plunge,

then with a look that said, *who is this cub*
anyhow? he took cognizance again
of where he was: the road, the mountain top,

and the air, rinsed clear after a shower of rain,
worked on his anger visibly until:
"It is a road you travel on your own.

I who learned to read in the reek of flax
and smelled hanged bodies rotting on their gibbets
and saw their looped slime gleaming from the sacks—

hard-mouthed Ribbonmen and Orange bigots
made me into the fork-tongued turncoat
who mucked the byre of those politics.

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If times were hard, then I could be hard too.
I made the traitor in me sink the knife.
And maybe there is a lesson there for you

whoever you are, wherever you come out of,
for though there's something natural in your smile
there's something in it strikes me as defensive."

"I have no mettle for the angry role,"
I said, "I come from County Derry,
born in earshot of an Hibernian Hall

where a band of Ribbonmen played hymns to Mary.
By then the brotherhood was a frail procession
staggering back home drunk on Patrick's Day

in collarettes and sashes fringed with green.
Obedient strains like theirs tuned me first
and not that harp of unforgiving iron

the Fenians strung. And a lot of what you wrote
I heard and did. This Lough Derg station.
Flax-pullings. Dances. Summer crossroads chat.

And the shaky local voice of education.
All that. And always, Orange drums.
And neighbours on the road at night with guns."

"I know, I know, I know, I know," he said,
"but you have to try to make sense of what comes.
Remember everything and keep your head."

"The alders in the hedge," I said, "mushrooms,
dark-clumped grass where cows or horses dunged,
the cluck when pith-lined chestnut shells split open

in your hand, the melt of shells corrupting,
old jampots in a drain clogged up with mud—"
But now Carleton was interrupting:

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"All this is like a trout kept in a spring
or maggots sown in wounds for desperate ointment—
another life that cleans our element.

We are earthworms of the earth, and all that
has gone through us is what will be our trace."
He turned on his heel when he was saying this

and headed up the road at the same hard pace.

III

I got back into the driver's seat. Sunlight
moved apple-green over the hill farms,
a lough came clear, bog-cotton bowed its wet

grey head, dried white and raced the wind
that shook the car with its soft buffetings.
The airiness of being on high ground

lifted me, I let the brake off, ran
rumbling downhill without the engine,
got into gear and started and began

relaxing to the road and the car's rhythms.
It was twenty years since I had done the station.
Busloads of students after the exams—

we were a credit, they could be proud of us,
those parents who sacrificed, those other
dour and threadbare founders in birettas

whose faces swam and faded: a road-block
swung into view as I took a corner
fluently at speed, so that I had to brake

and creep past soldiers flattened in the hedge
with guns cradled on tripods covering me,
up to three halted "pigs" under camouflage.

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The tightness and the stillness round that space
when the car stops in the road, the troops take in
its make and number, and, as one bends his face

towards your window, you catch sight of more
in a field beyond, hunkering with intent
behind black pupils with a perfect bore—

it has all the pure calm of nightmare,
like standing throat-deep in a pool, your head
a severed head on a pane of water.

"Name, sir? Driving license? Destination?"
The light flotsam of his intonation
skimmed past me, like a bit part in Shakespeare,

Cockney as Keats or *O What A Lovely War*.
How different were the words *home*, *Christ*, *ale*, *master*,
on his lips and on mine! "Just step out, sir.

Open your boot. And sign this document."
Yet why should I fear him less than my own neighbour
in the khaki of his Ulster regiment,

his guttural "Where are you coming from?"
feral, staccato and familiar
as the muffled drumbeats of a July drum?

"This island, sir. We've had a lot to-day
heading across there. What's it all about?"
"They're pilgrims. It's a kind of purgatory,"

I answered. He was handing back the license
but shouted to his mates up in the turret
of a "pig": "It's the bible-thumpers

we're getting through this area. O.K.,
you can drive on now, sir." Two riflemen
waved their rifles to motion me away,

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a little emptier, as always, drained
bodiless almost, as if their armament
and insolence, natural or trained,

had flushed out of me everything I was
so all that was left was bone I had betrayed
and the steering wheel in my obedient paws.

But soon it felt like a fictional event,
the temper of the voice irrelevant
to blowing heather, cloud shadow, bent

thorn trees in the roadside, lanes to farms
I never entered but without entering knew
their dog-barks, chain-clinks, puddles and mildew.

To be at one with things. A piled-up cairn,
a ploughed field in Ulster white with gulls.
I began to roar, "I hate where I was born,

I hate my neighbour, hate everything that made me
biddable and unforthcoming." And so
I drove for the border, a goaded shadow.

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ELIZABETH SPENCER

Two Stories

The Puzzle Poem

An infrequent caller on Lenore Wells in New York was a young man named Kevin Stoner. She had found herself next to him on a crowded sofa one winter evening at the apartment of some people she did not know well and seldom saw. Being wedged down between the sofa's high scrolled arm and Kevin Stoner's leg and shoulder, she could not reach the coffee table, so he took to feeding her, placing nuts, olives and canapes carefully, humorously, on her palm, waiting till she ate each one before giving her another. The party was long and they talked, having from the first discovered themselves both to be Southerners, small town people far from home.

Shortly thereafter, he telephoned her for the first time.

Kevin was from Virginia originally but now lived in New York state, slightly west of the fashionable commuter line. He was a painter, a ceramist, a potter, a would-be playwright, a poet. Lenore assumed at times he was a would-be everything. Where he got the money to take her to lunch was as mysterious to her as why he wanted to or as how he so easily made her laugh.

She had had some need of laughing in the last year or so. Her only son was off in school in New Hampshire, winter after winter. In summers she and her husband spent several weeks with him on Cape Cod. But even before this routine had asserted itself, she had had to learn the ache of not being the most important tie in his life.

"He used to be close to me," she confided in Kevin Stoner over lunch, "until he was about ten. Then suddenly it turned out that his father was his great delight, his hero. I accepted this, but then I saw that Ron, evidently, wasn't all that inter-

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ested. I think he sent Gordon off to school just because he was taking up too much time."

"He picked the wrong parent," Kevin remarked, "if he didn't like being shipped off. But you can't scheme about who you're going to favor, can you? You wouldn't want him doing that?"

"When I saw how things were going, I begged Ron to let the big father-son relationship fade gradually, not just cut the nerve."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, that boys were tougher than I thought. That Gordon would be O.K. in a week or so up there. The funny part: it seemed he was right. I don't understand—" She stopped.

"What?" He was looking at her carefully, this spare young man with the choppy haircut in which patches of white—cowlicks maybe—cropped up like pale brush in a brown field; his grey eyes seemed intently concerned with her.

"What feelings they have." There, she'd said it; it was out. An assurance came back to her from the past; some relative or college lecturer or counsellor—she couldn't remember who—saying that Southerners shared more than anything else a sense of feelings, of how important they were.

Kevin Stoner leaned back. They had come to the Museum of Modern Art for lunch, even though she was likely to be spotted by somebody she knew, her husband having the sort of job which gave him colleagues whose wives might go to the Museum courtyard on a fine September day for lunch. Now they had moved their trays and dishes away and were leaning over fresh cups of coffee. Kevin Stoner had, she was touched to notice, put on a knit tie, green, with his rust-colored shirt, which had evidently passed through a washing machine recently but had not been pressed.

"You understand *your* feelings, don't you?" he finally asked.

"Oh, that's easy. Once I feel something, it goes so deep I couldn't dig it up and change it if I had to. But then I've found that with some people emotions can change, be forgotten, get lost, or just become unimportant whenever something new comes along."

Kevin was staring outward between fronds of beech just turning yellow to where the solid curves of a female figure by

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Malliol asserted lines of breath and warmth amid the strong straight plunges of vertical New York.

"If nothing's permanent," she said, "then nothing's worth very much, is it? Nothing, from one day to the next, can be very real."

"Maybe when they used to ask, 'What's the world coming to?' this was the answer."

"Coming to what?"

"Changing. And changing. And changing."

Perhaps he was teasing. She thought it over. Finally, getting nowhere, she looked about her, appreciative of the garden wall, which muffled the traffic noise. The bright day's freshness had in it a touch of sea smell, a thought of salt, gulls and crisp water.

He fell to telling her about Walton, New York, the little town he was living in, which had its share of strange people. There was an old handyman up there who bought up odd lots of wallpaper and went around trying to find rooms to paper which would evenly use up the number of rolls he had. He would not paper an old lady's living room because he would have had three rolls—a hard number to dispose of—left over. He argued her into choosing another pattern. Then there was the couple who wheeled their groceries home in a wheelbarrow, having got tired of making so many stops. They disliked the shopping center and patronized little stores in the town—grocery, hardware, drug store—all separate businesses where nobody remarked on their wheelbarrow. They sometimes stuck it in a parking slot if there was time on the meter.

Lenore and Kevin strolled that day along sunny streets, walked to the Plaza fountain, passed into Central Park. As the first of the shadows near the zoo turned less distinct and brushed them with a touch of coolness, he put his hand across her shoulders, moved it until his fingers, pressing, lingered against her neck. "Let's go somewhere," he said. "Let's be alone together."

"I'm way too old for you," she smiled. "Not to mention married."

They had said these same phrases, several times before.

She waved him off on a Fifth Avenue bus.

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In January, after the holidays, it came to her while putting up the Christmas decorations, left-over wrappings, wreaths, favors and ornaments, into a large box, to wonder about him. The bright papers had reminded her of his story about the wallpaper salesman. She had got a greeting card from him but no news was on it, and he had not called in a month. She remembered especially the museum day and felt again his hand against her neck, in Central Park. She imagined him, bleached as winter grass, walking the snow-lined streets of Walton, entering his rented back-entrance apartment he had often described, saw the empty garage he had taken for a workroom, full of paint smells, with brushes staining in jars of varsol and turpentine, envisioned raveling canvases leaning unframed against the wall, a sculptured uncast bust or two in white plaster, part of a hunched male torso, back to the viewer. He said that he had had to insulate the place himself when it got too cold for work. Vividly she saw him climb to stand on a straight chair; he nailed felt padding into place above the door with wiry accurate fingers.

Taping the box shut, marking it with a thick-inked scrawl, "Christmas remains," she went out on impulse and telephoned, but found that Kevin Stoner had no listing. Returning, she wrote a note. "Nothing from you lately. Hope you're fine. Christmas was nothing but guests and parties. Between Ron's and Gordon's friends, I felt like the newest all-purpose appliance. Please write unless you're coming in. Lenore."

By way of return mail she received a scrawled poem on a piece of folded draft paper with no name signed and nothing further written.

Brush against canvas
May as well be
Touched to rock face
Or to tree.

Think that vanishing
May be identity.
Un-saying, un-making,
Finally, to free.

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A puzzle poem. If his art's no better than that, no wonder he doesn't get anywhere, she thought; but got stuck on the word "vanishing" as being the only one, for practical purposes, she could relate to.

Mercy! she thought. Has Kevin killed himself? She doubted that, then something in the solemn nature of the verse made her see him plain as day, even to the line of concentration between his sandy, irregular eyebrows. She wanted, irresistibly, to hear him speak.

For the Wells family, a year of bad news followed. Ron Wells's promotion did not materialize; he thought seriously of resigning at once, but caution ruled: he began secretly to cast about for a new job. Gordon Wells failed to pass his last year before university, thus putting acceptance in jeopardy. They could not afford to keep him in private school anyway. He came home and looked for summer work.

There were family upheavals, all about money. All of them found this boring, but didn't seem able to stop it. In New York, you can never stop anything, Ron said. Start rising and the upper slopes get fast and easy. Start falling and your speed multiplies. Good things get better and cost more. Cheap things get worse— But, said Lenore, they cost more too. Gordon joked that he was letting his beard grow because he couldn't afford to shave. It will reach the floor, his father said. Lenore moved from one thing to the next, always for them, but that was how she was, and they thanked her kindly in their crisp hard voices. Then the rent soared and a move was indicated.

Their days were passed in looking, forever looking. For jobs, apartments, cheaply priced items. The Problem was everywhere and all of time went to it.

By October, life had stabilized. Ron had transferred with precarious success; Gordon had a job in a Village record shop. They had found a place on the West Side, near the Hudson. The sleek apartment, scene of former glories, now grown tarnished with worries, quarrels and debates, stood all but empty. With two more weeks to run on the lease, Lenore was still going in and out almost daily, gathering up small treasures.

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One twilight, hurrying through her old lobby, she saw a man loitering near the entrance. He seemed about to enter, then withdrew, looking aside uncertainly, and this shyness, along with his not being dressed for such a place, canceled her New York wariness at the same time it made a kinship. Somebody there must have asked him to something, and now he felt hesitant to show up. He tried again to enter, turning toward her. It was Kevin.

She cried out, dropping two loaded carry sacks. They kissed.

"I tried to telephone you but you'd been disconnected, they said. I thought I'd better hurry."

"We haven't got a phone yet," she said. "We've moved over to Riverside Drive, or near it. Oh, nothing's wrong," she assured him, meaning, she supposed, that nobody had died.

He begged her out for a drink, and picked up her sacks to walk along beside her. In a bar's dim corner, over dark wood, he pondered her. She must conservatively look ten years older, she thought; what could he expect?

"You've turned down my only advice," he complained. "You're still carrying on. Coping. Is that what they call it?"

"What's to take the place of it?" she wanted to know.

"I gave you the right clue when I sent you the poem. Vanish. To hell with making it. Concentrate on how not to make it. Get loose."

She sipped small swallows of weak daiquiri. "I think that gravity is here to stay."

She asked about his whereabouts, his doings since they'd met. "Do you still paint? Do ceramics and pottery? Write?"

"Everything. I'm also working in a record shop on Eighth Street, down in the Village."

"So is Gordon," she said with a jump.

"One of those weird coincidences. At first I couldn't believe it. But he doesn't know me from Adam's off ox."

Lenore now felt the quality of everything shift slightly, as dreams do the moment one suspects them of being dreams.

Kevin told her that he had left Walton because it was too cold and bad for his health. Before going he had done a wall painting as a gift to the town, many of whose citizens were willing to overlook small debts. It was the ones he knew best

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that he painted, Saturday shopping, all along the street. He was kind in his work, but when it came to his landlady his brush acted up: he showed her with her big fat hand out. She was always sticking mail through his studio window with that hand, or putting it in empty to ask for the rent. She went at night and painted over the hand. Why? Because it was ugly. All the time, her stomach big as a county sheriff's poured into her stretch slacks, grey hair a witch's mess of tight curls, wrists red, nose red, feet laced into shoes like corsets—tin-colored eyes, corrugated neck—all the time, she had been vain. All the time, she had thought fondly of him. She had told him goodbye with hurt tears. He had left with a small unswallowable rock in his throat.

"Oh, Lord," said Lenore, knowing how he felt. They both fell to laughing.

He had gone for a time to Virginia, then to work in a glass-blowing plant in the mountains. That was in the spring. He had a scattering of grey in his hair; so the white patches had been cowlicks, all along. They said in Charlotte, North Carolina, where she had been brought up, that country people had them, because of the diet, which was poor. She could see Kevin Stoner as a boy, moving about some rickety Virginia farm, a bucket of chicken feed in his hand, sliding back the latch of a lot gate.

"Will you stay up here, or go back South again?" she asked.

"I ask myself, but so far I haven't answered."

He asked her, "What about you? Don't you want to leave, go back to where it all was once, find it just the way you left it? Don't you want to eat soul food down where it never changes? Up here they'd just keep moving on. Down there, they'd never know we'd gone away."

In seductive fantasy, they went hitchhiking off, into the hills of home, like the end of a movie, music swelling, camera fixed on their gallant dwindling.

"I wandered into your poem," she told him. "I think that's what happened to me."

"You're in it now. The poem's mine. You won't get out again."

"The fate is bearable." She was smiling.

He paid for the drinks and in the street put her with her

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sacks stashed about her into a taxi. Just before, he placed a kiss on her forehead.

Was he real? wondered Lenore Wells. For nobody knew the strain she had been under better than she. She turned to wave but could find him nowhere.

Do we invent what we need, what we have to have? she wondered, resolving that next time she would ask that of Kevin Stoner.

Madonna

WHEN ALONE THERE, coming there alone, I sometimes stop and rub my hand across the wood on the outside bannister. I lean and smell the wood, hoping no one to think I'm crazy is passing in the little street, though down in that area any watcher is likely to be crazy, too. The bannister is painted grey, weather-worn, uneven. The smell has something like damp and old paint shreds in it, but underneath those there is the sound odor of heartwood, called up by the sun. Sun and wood together warm me, make me know the back of my neck, the touch of my own hand, the set of my ankle: all that perennially is. The bushes are growing up taller near the door and are hanging over onto the steps, also lifting up against the windows. Their green is June-fresh, the leaf is large, I do not know the name.

I look, debate going in. The present tenants have kept the off-white bleached-denim draperies I selected six years back—I can see beyond the fold of one to the empty fireplace. If I mount two steps more I will be pressing my face to the pane as I have many times since the Eckleses left, seeing into the narrow hall past the stairwell, seeing ghost images in motion. There am I as I was five years ago, not much different; Bob Eckles is following, height overtopping me, moving in neat sand-colored chino trousers, and I, swaying now and then out of line with his more direct advance, revealed to be in dark cotton, the piping of the sleeveless shoulder cutting into deeply tanned flesh. His two steps make an easy three of

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mine. Young America follows at my sandal heel. Young America is here on a Montreal street because of principles about the Viet Nam War. High principles. Oh, very high.

He pulls the blinds. His wife is still in the hospital with the baby, coming home in a day or so, the third time they've both been sick since that hard birth back in the dark, snow-streaked winter. He knows I like her, would do anything for them, have done all I can since the moment of their appearance. "But this is a thing apart from all that . . . different, altogether different," he's said to me, more than once. My clothes are dropping onto a chair. His fingers touch my arm, press into my bare back. As their warmth spreads out, my nerve ends leap to life, wild and strong. "I don't like to do this here," I murmur. "Why not?" "You know why not." "Anywhere's the same." "After a point, I guess." "You guess? You know." We're kissing, and the words float out toward nothing.

At the memory, my spine shudders, I spin off as though from a physical blow, lean against the warm wood, face down.

I have to ring the bell now. Somebody will notice I'm just standing there like a woman in a dream, or drunk, or fainting from the sun. The street is a narrow old one where some people stay on for years and some of those, secluded penny-counters, see life from windows only, a patch of pavement, two façades, a changing tree. I mount to the landing, ring. The face that appears in the left of two oblong window panes which flank the door is not that of Bob or Mary Eckles. It is a woman, gaunt and ugly, with an Indian's large bone structure at the eye sockets. Mary Eckles was gentle with long light-colored hair; at a time when good little American madonna faces might be found with a joint stuck between their lips, she never smoked, sipped milk, was coaxed to eat enough. She had a musical voice, pleasant and low. The large woman back of the door recognizes me; her landlady, after all. She yanks the door open, lets out a squawk like an old phonograph record.

"Oah! It's yew!"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Welford," I go into my lie. "I had a call from a tenant on my ansaphone—I couldn't make the name out. I had to come down this way, so I thought I'd ask. Was it you?"

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"No, we ain't called I know of. You remember about them storm windows, eh?"

"Oh, that's being taken care of. You'll get them back before fall."

"No, it wasn't us."

"Sorry to bother you."

"Why don't your husband never come?"

"I told you before. He's tied up downtown and in Westmount. These below St. Catherine are my job."

Shall I say: I never dreamed of managing any rental property, low-rent or high-rent, before the Eckleses came. Then I begged. "I can take some of them off your hands. You think I enjoy life? Lunching with other women, shopping for clothes, giving dinner parties? I've had enough of it. Fire me if I'm not good." Even after the Eckleses left, I held on; to keep those houses tended gave life to my memories, but what are you, Mrs. Welford, doing in this very house, making a discord of the past? My fault, of course, for having rented to you at all. But Mary Eckles herself had made the first of the discords, as she'd had a perfect right to do. I can hear her still in that living room I glimpsed just now through the window, and again, from the hall, through the open door:

"Benefactress! Lady bountiful! Thanks a lot! If there was any way to take it all and wad it up and throw it at you, I'd do it! It was bad enough already, a draft evader's wife, walked away from at parties, cut dead on the street, as soon as anybody finds out about you, out you go. Oh, everybody's against that war, all right. Oh, yes! Against it till they meet somebody who's done the honest thing and refused to fight it. And you our only friend. It was you who 'understood.' Oh, yes, you were just wonderful to us! You were *great*!"

I wish I could get angry in return, but I can't. I hate seeing her smooth features distort and change, hate the tears that smear off into her long hair.

"Aren't you a little angry with Bob, too?" I ask, and almost smile, for there's a wry humor in it all. Bob and I ironically had landed in a thicket of desire without meaning to, from having to sit together so often and worry over her precarious pregnancy. It was close to the truth that I was their only friend. Had she rather Bob and I had sat about lusting?

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Plucking out the thorns of desire? Watching the salt blood flow? Avoiding eyes and touch? I *had* helped them: got him work, found them a reasonable place to stay, even located people uncritical of defectors, who would invite them out for company and talk. "I thought you knew all along," I told her, quietly honest.

"How long did it go on?" She's getting calmer, looking fretfully aside. As a child she must have exploded into short, intense tantrums, wanted to burst with rage, found there wasn't any way to, then calmed down into plain humanity again, having changed nothing.

"I can't remember." This is true. Reality like that is not boarded up with time; does she think that? "Not so long." In my turn, I am outraged too. "Oh, you could be fairer than this!" Their marriage was never at stake with me. A man so much younger could only be temporary, even as a lover. A man so much younger could, at a certain point, be exactly what a woman needs. "It's Bob you ought to talk to; not me." I ought to tell her what I used to ask myself: Question: What's sadder than two waifs together? Answer: Two waifs apart. Q.: What must I do? A.: You must let go.

She's crying softly now, the soft rain after the hard, exploding cloudburst. "I've so little . . . so little to go on. Only just him . . . and Kathy. I can't go back home, the family's against me. Oh, they're crazy. My mother is crazy. She was that way for a long time before I met Bob. She would turn on me. I told you, long ago, all about that. The little life I had, I trusted you to come into it. And you've damaged it. It won't, ever, be the same. It's all messed up."

So it's me you're telling about it, I think. I think: These Americans! I sit in the living room with her most of that September day. She had telephoned in the morning, having to see me. The baby's asleep, the room is chilling down toward evening. She needs me. Hates me, resents me, has to see me. Has found some passionate note from me, stuck away in a drawer where he'd saved it. The street outside, its leaves turning, its narrow modest French-Canadian look, is no part of her. Grey stone façades, green leaves in summer, grey stone with green leaves, leaves turning orange, grey stone in the snow—that's Canada. And dormer windows above in the

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mansard's drop, painted to match the doorways—white or yellow, or blue, or red—and always the steep steps in shining grey paint: that's Montreal, French Montréal, and no part of her. Nor am I. Shall I say: Everything I have and am, have had, have been, will have and be, always gets "messed up," as you put it, one way or another. It happens to everybody. It is nothing but acceptance to recognize that.

Suddenly, out of thinking these things, I discover something. Americans want somewhere, somehow, a purity, an inviolability. But why then did Bob Eckles, strong in his marriage, young husband, young father, "mess up" this enviable estate by an affair with me? Because—I saw now—his act against the war was purity enough already. I saw that it might have been enough for her too if she'd ever been entirely involved in his act, close to his thinking. Then some affair of his would have cost her no more tears than a gnat in her eye. But peasant intellectual, striding shoulder to shoulder with her mate, Mary Eckles was not. She had let me do things for her too acceptingly. She was an American college girl, spoiled by parents. The smooth Madonna face was a neutrality, a perfect balance maintained over the tensions she daily survived, never presumed to take in hand. How far back this must go. To that "craziness" she had talked about, more than once. Young people often talk of crazy parents, but suppose this talk of hers was true? Then my sympathy could reach to that, the source of her weakness.

"I loved him," I told her. I thought she ought, at least, to know that.

What had she answered on that September afternoon? I can't remember. The voice, slight and distant, whirls away in time.

Now in this summer weather, empty of the Eckleses, the sun beats constantly on the tin roof, but in the back bedroom where the baby slept, the rez de chaussée, across from the kitchen, it is cool, sheltered by the shrubs grown up at the windows, darkened by the dusty Venetian blinds he always drew closed for us (they tilt unevenly). His heels are always sounding behind me in that hallway, two steps to my three, repeated four times—five times?—over. Did I love him? I

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called it that. He aroused me, I desired him, his touch fled out to every nerve, sought inward to the dark core. He fitted, suited, all I physically am. And more. When we discussed something, we spoke equally; when we laughed, we laughed together. ("You know about that war?" I said. "You know what I think about it . . . you want to know? I don't think anything, nothing at all. It's funny, isn't it?" "I'm dying laughing it's so funny." "Don't you think I should?" "It's not your country. Why care?") At times it seemed that Mary and the baby both were our children. That was the heart of what we reached to. That's fine, if apolitical. ("I go alone," he said once. "Alone, and I don't mind.")

"Let me go on managing those old houses," I said to my husband, after the Eckleses left. "You know I'm good at it. Who could you find half as good?"

My consenting husband, "charming host," "effective man in the English-speaking business community," he takes it for granted that steps have followed me down any number of hallways, that the blinds drawn for me are numerous. He overestimates. Seeking is easy, finding is hard. If Mary Eckles could but know it, when she and her husband appeared, I wasn't even looking.

I had first seen their faces before me one day when shopping downtown. I had stopped by my husband's office and, finding him and his secretary both gone to lunch, had sat down at the front desk. So they, entering for the first time, took me for the secretary, able to answer something about an apartment. "Have you got anything for us?" He was tall and bearded, with rust-colored hair to the shoulders; she young and fair and pregnant, and the snow outside had melted away. I had noticed a haze of green on a willow near a parking lot, buds on trees red and swollen, the sky a melting blue. They stood hand in hand. Out of the talk between them as they'd entered I had caught her name: "Mary." Her skin was pale but luminous, her grey-blue eyes steadily serious, her mouth unaware of make-up. "A room at the inn, perhaps?" I almost said, the first I'd thought of convent days in many a year. I could recall the rustle of nuns' skirts along polished corridors, see the flat arrangement of furniture, the harsh colors of cheap religious pictures: I had hated it, I thought,

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but a secret meaning hidden beneath its surfaces was broken open for me now, and in this living presence I found tears rising to my eyes. Such summoning power is angelic: I was theirs from that moment. . . .

"Sorry to have to trouble you, Mrs. Welford."

Did I say that before? The memory has done all it can; it has taken me back to the beginning of itself, to that day at the secretary's desk, to a vision's fleetingness and its power to remain.

I leave the little house in the poor street, and going think of one other thing. To re-enter the country he came from, Bob Eckles had to get, through channels tricky to deal with, a false identity, faked documents, and, further, to alter his fingerprints by scarring them with acid. Necessary or not—I don't know. He had thought it was. There had been directions to find, or learn somehow, and equipment to obtain. He himself, alone, had bent to this punishing task. Politics is powerful, reaching in to change the imprint of a lover's touch.

Mary Eckles, were you hurt by that?

Mary Eckles, if I see you again, will I get to say: Did it hurt you as much as it hurt me, to think of his fingers burnt and changed?

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JONATHAN CHAVES

Translations from Liu E

During the last five or so years, there has been a virtual explosion of publication activity in The People's Republic of China, stimulated by the relaxation of restrictions in the wake of the "Gang of Four's" demise. In the field of classical Chinese literature, there have appeared critical editions, studies, and biographies of authors in gratifying numbers. None of these would have been permitted to see the light of day during the ten years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Of the recent publications, one of the most interesting and important is a tiny volume of poems by Liu E (1857–1909), also known as Liu T'ieh-yün. Liu is famous as the author of The Travels of Lao Ts'an (Lao Ts'an yu-chi), *at one and the same time the last great work of traditional Chinese fiction, and a transitional novel in which the first signs of western influence are apparent. Harold Shadick's superb translation into English was published in 1952 by Cornell University Press. It now appears that a small MS of poetry by Liu E has been in the possession of his family all these years. Liu's grandson, Liu Hui-sun, made preparations to have it published in 1965, but the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution disrupted these plans. With the end of the Revolution, it became possible once again to proceed with the preparation of the book, and in December of 1980 it was finally issued by the Ch'i-Lu Publishing House in the city of Chinan (Jinan), with annotations by Liu Hui-sun.*

The poems are among the finest to be written in the classical manner so late in Chinese history; there is a freshness and authenticity about them which earn Liu E the right to be considered one of the few novelists who is equally adept at poetry.

*Of the poems translated here, (all for the first time), all but two—*I Remember *and* New Year's Eve*—were written during two trips Liu E made to Japan and Korea, in the spring and in the fall of 1906. Also included is a foreword originally written by Liu to accom-*

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pany an early group of his poems. Aside from the above mentioned two poems, all the others translated here actually postdate the foreword.

POET'S FOREWORD

When I was young, frequent illnesses forced me to abandon my studies, and so my acquaintance with literature remained shallow. In middle age, driven by hunger, I had to run back and forth across the length and breadth of the country, and there was even less time for reading. But it was not only a matter of circumstance: as it happens, an aversion to study is part of my nature. Now I have knocked about for forty years in this world, so I have already reached an age when I am no longer a "youth to be held in awe."[1] What ambitions could I possibly have now in work or in literature? When there is a moment of inspiration, I write poems as they come. Not only is this not a case of "striving for artistic accomplishment when you have no talent": I don't even have the intention of striving for artistic accomplishment! These poems I have randomly recorded here simply to amuse myself. Full moon of the first month, the year *ping-shen* [1896]—I just jotted this down.

[1]A playful allusion to the Confucian *Analects*, IX, 22: "The Master said, Hold the young in awe. How do you know that they will not one day be all that you are now? But if a man has reached forty or fifty and nothing has been heard of him, then I grant there is no need to hold him in awe." (Translation of Arthur Waley, with minor emendation.)

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WAITING FOR THE FERRY AT INCHŎN[2,3]

1

Gazing west—the isles of paradise,[4]
beyond an expanse of mist;

alone, I stand in my mountain room,
lost in reverie.

Ocean vapors rise like steam,
turn into multi-colored clouds:

wild mountains, innumerable,
floating in the sky.

2

Fresh flowers, brimming with dew,
fill the women's chambers:

beautiful women, their window-leaves
thrown open to the view!

At the horizon, a single thread,
dark and thin, like a hair:

one woman points to it, and says,
"The tide is coming in!"

[2]*Inchŏn*: One of (South) Korea's major seaports, located on the west coast of the Korean peninsula on the Yellow Sea, to the southwest of Seoul.

[3]Text: Liu Hui-sun, ed., *T'ieh-yün shih ts'un* [*Extant Poems of Liu E*], Chi-nan: Ch'i-Lu Publishing House, 1980, pp. 40–41.

[4]*Isles of paradise*: According to the poet's grandson, this conventional phrase refers here to Japan, as it often does. Looking westward from Inchŏn, however, the poet would actually be gazing in the direction of China, where he is probably returning after a stay in Japan.

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3

The fishermen haul in their nets
as the evening tide returns;

I lean on the railing, into the wind,
and watch this scene from a painting.

This is the moment when the setting sun
touches the mountain's edge:

the whole catch is glistening
with scales of brilliant red!

4

The wail of a bugle shatters my dream,
awakens me at midnight:

the ocean's exhalation brings chill
in mid-summer.

At just the moment when loneliness
seems impossible to dispel,

through a clear night sky the glowing moon
comes toward the balcony.

5

Past midnight, all is quiet,
total calm.

The wind has stopped—beneath a vast sky
the night air is fresh.

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Lighthouse beams are turning, disappearing
and reappearing:

firefly lights, glittering
in the midst of the ocean.

I REMEMBER

I remember when we made our first promises of love—

behind a door-curtain shadowed with blossoms
you played the zither for me.

We only wanted the candle to drip and drip with silver wax,

and paid the water clock no heed as it sounded hour after hour!

You would throw open the lattice shades
to let in the chattering swallows,

or put aside your music
to hear the orioles sing.

Hand in hand we didn't hope for titles or high station,

only to pass through this life together perched on the same branch.

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PLEASURES OF SHINBASHI[5]

Entertained by song and dance here in this wine pavilion,

truly a palace of paradise where the soul melts completely
away!

Having mastered all the "postures of joy" the Buddhists
talk about,

in one spring evening, twenty-five cases
of perfect enlightenment!

THE HOUSE OF RED LEAVES

In the House of Red Leaves are the most beautiful dances:

swirling snowflakes, twirling winds, in time
to the beat of the drum!

Filling the air, frosty maple leaves flutter down
before our wine cups,

as if a goddess were scattering blossoms,
a rainfall of red from the sky.

[5]*Shinbashi*: Apparently refers here to one of the pleasure quarters where Liu E seems to have spent much of his time in Japan.

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ON THE FIFTEENTH DAY OF THE EIGHTH MONTH: WATCHING A RAINSTORM FROM A TOWER IN SEOUL

1

My thoughts flow in streams around this tower;

the rain slants in, splattering the room.

Sadly I stare at clouds like mountains,
remembering home far away.

There tonight is celebrated the Festival of Mid-Autumn.

2

Cotton blankets let in the cold,
dreams will not take shape;

in this hotel room the guttering lamp glimmers,
nearly goes out.

Midnight, two o'clock, four in the morning—
no human sounds at all.

I listen to the wind, listen to the rain,
listen to the sound of the pines.

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BOILING FALLS

Maple leaves fill the emerald mountain,
leaf after leaf of brilliant flame!
The Milky Way—when did it spill from the sky
and fall to earth in this place?
She seems to be a woman warrior,
full of power, but sensuous as well!
She spits out vapors into rainbows;
heavy with blossoms, her cloudy hairdo falls.
Spray and foam sprinkled on our whiskers,
we sit on rocks by the stream.
And who is the most deeply moved of all?
—This "China-guy" right here!

NEW YEAR'S EVE

The north wind blows, cracking the earth,
in sadness, seeing off the old year.
The servant announces we're out of rice,
and a creditor has come, asking for money.
A hungry crow caws in evening snow;
a wild goose cuts through cold mist.
This is the way my life is now:
others are even worse off.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

Physical Universe

He woke at five and, unable
to go back to sleep,
went downstairs.

A book was lying on the table
where his son had done his homework.
He took it into the kitchen,
made coffee, poured himself a cup,
and settled down to read.

"There was a local eddy in the swirling gas
of the primordial galaxy,
and a cloud was formed, the protosun,
as wide as the present solar system.

This contracted. Some of the gas
formed a diffuse, spherical nebula,
a thin disk, that cooled and flattened.
Pulled one way by its own gravity,
the other way by the sun,
it broke, forming smaller clouds,
the protoplanets. Earth
was 2000 times as wide as it is now."

The earth was without form, and void,
and darkness was upon the face of the deep.

*

"Then the sun began to shine,
dispelling the gases and vapors,
shrinking the planets, melting earth,
separating iron and silicate

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to form the core and mantle.
Continents appeared . . ."

history, civilisation,
the discovery of America
and the settling of Green Harbor,
bringing us to Tuesday, the seventh of July.

Tuesday, the day they pick up the garbage!
He leaped into action,
took the garbage bag out of its container,
tied it with a twist of wire,
and carried it out to the tool-shed,
taking care not to let the screen-door slam,
and put it in the large garbage-can
that was three-quarters full.
He kept it in the tool-shed so the raccoons
couldn't get at it.

He carried the can out to the road,
then went back into the house
and walked around, picking up newspapers
and fliers for: "Thompson Seedless Grapes,
California's finest sweet eating";

"Scott Bathroom Tissue";

"Legislative report from Senator Ken LaValle."

He put all this paper in a box,
and emptied the waste baskets in the two
downstairs bathrooms,
and the basket in the study.

He carried the box out to the road,
taking care not to let the screen-door slam,
and placed the box next to the garbage.

Now let the garbage men come!

*

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He went back upstairs.
Susan said, "Did you put out the garbage?"
But her eyes were closed.
She was sleeping, yet could speak in her sleep,
ask a question, even answer one.

"Yes," he said, and climbed into bed.
She turned around to face him,
with her eyes still closed.

He thought, perhaps she's an oracle,
speaking from the Collective Unconscious.
He said to her, "Do you agree with Darwin
that people and monkeys have a common ancestor?
Or should we stick to the Bible?"

She said, "Did you take out the garbage?"

"Yes," he said, for the second time.
Then thought about it. Her answer
had something in it of the sublime.
Like a *koan* . . . the kind of irrelevance
a Zen-master says to the disciple
who is asking riddles of the universe.

He put his arm around her,
and she continued to breathe evenly
from the depths of sleep.

How to Live on Long Island

Lilco, $75.17;
Mastercard, $157.89;
Sunmark Industries, $94.03 . . .

Jim is paying his bills.
He writes out a check
and edges it into the envelope

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provided by the company.
They always make them too small.

The print in the little box
in the top right corner informs him:
"The Post Office will not deliver
mail without proper postage."
They seem to know that the public
is composed of thieves and half-wits.

He seals the last envelope,
licks a stamp, sticks it on,
and with a feeling of virtue,
a necessary task accomplished,
takes the checks out to the mail-box.

It's a cool, clear night in Fall,
lights flickering through the leaves.
He thinks, all these families
with their situation comedies:
husbands writing checks,
wives studying fund-raising,
children locked in their rooms
listening to the music that appeals to them,
remind me of . . . fireflies
that shine for a night and die.

Of all these similar houses
what shall be left? Not even stones.
One could almost understand the Pharaohs
with their pyramids and obelisks.

Every month when he pays his bills
Jim Bandy becomes a philosopher.
The rest of the time he's OK.

Jim has a hobby: fishing.
Last year he flew to Alaska.
Cold the salmon stream,
dark the Douglas firs,
and the pure stars are cold.

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A bear came out of the forest.
Jim had two salmon . . . he threw one
but the bear kept coming.
He threw the other . . . it stopped.

The fish that are most memorable
he mounts, with a brass plate
giving the name and place and date:
Chinook Salmon, Red Salmon,
Brown Trout, Grouper,
Barracuda, Hammerhead Shark.

They do a lot of drinking in Alaska.
He saw thirty or forty lying drunk
in the street. And on the plane . . .

They cannot stand living in Alaska,
and he cannot stand Long Island
without flying to Alaska.

GAIL MAZUR

Jewelweed

We were talking about sex, taking
the dirt road to town, walking
slowly in the hot afternoon.

I hardly saw the fields
shimmering in the heat, the goldenrod's
itchy impressionist glow,

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the pale Touch-me-not,
or jewelweed, blooming in shade,
so skewed was my vision,

so interior. That day we agreed
never to touch each other,
passing the warm brown beds of pine

needles, the tiny graveyard. My face,
your face, reddened in August's ardent
flush; our hands clung to their pockets.

That conversation seemed harmless—
strange, that I still need
to put it this way—

Anyway, it must have been too far
to town. We turned back at a stone
marker to join our friends swimming

in a black pond deep in our past.
Now I am in the future where nothing
has happened, nothing happens.

What were we walking toward
that prickly summer day,
both of us suddenly guarded,

uneasy strangers, or greenhorns,
or children transported unprepared
to a heartless institution?

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MARY J. CARRUTHERS

The Re-Vision of the Muse: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Judy Grahn, Olga Broumas

> The process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action.
>
> —Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*

THIS ESSAY CHIEFLY CONSIDERS four volumes of poetry, three published in 1978 and one the previous year. They are Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language*, Audre Lorde's *The Black Unicorn* (which includes poems published earlier in a chapbook called *Between Our Selves*), Judy Grahn's *The Work of a Common Woman* (a collection of poems previously published by the Feminist Press Collective of Oakland, California), and Olga Broumas' *Beginning With O*. Among them, these volumes articulate a distinctive movement in contemporary American poetry, the definition of which is the subject of this essay. I call this movement "Lesbian poetry," because the "naming and defining" of this phrase is its central poetic preoccupation. These poets choose to deal with life at the level of metaethics—its social, psychic, and aesthetic underpinnings, which are articulable only in myth; their metaethics takes its structure from a complex poetic image of lesbian relationship.

These four poets have voices that are bold, even arrogant, in their common, urgent desire to seize the language and forge with it an instrument for articulating women. Not all women writing today write this kind of poetry, not all poets who are lesbians are Lesbian poets, nor are all Lesbian poets always lesbian. I would like very much in this essay to keep separate the realms of life and art, except where in truth they do meet, in the alchemical laboratory of language. If we insist on applying to these poets the psychoanalytical interests and

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expectations of Confessional poetry, we will certainly misunderstand them because we will not properly hear them.

The word *lesbian* presents in paradigm the large issues of value in language, of women's psyche and of social transformation, of alienation and apocalypse, which these poets address. Rich has defined "the lesbian in us" as "a primary intensity between women, an intensity which in the world at large [has been] trivialized, caricatured, or invested with evil." She continues:

> It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively, render in language, grasp, the full connection between woman and woman. It is the lesbian in us who is creative, for the dutiful daughter of the fathers in us is only a hack.
>
> (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*)

To think of the word *lesbian* in terms of male-excluding or man-hating is profoundly to misunderstand these poets. Their poetry does not arise directly from nor concern itself primarily with a response to men. Its energy springs rather from the perception that women together and in themselves have a power which is transformative, but that in order to recover their power women need to move psychically and through metaphor to a place beyond the well-traveled routes of patriarchy and all its institutions, especially its linguistic and rhetorical ones. That is the task of "the lesbian in us," a phrase whose meaning is a constant theme in virtually all the poems which appear in these four volumes.

In this poetry, the word *lesbian* encapsulates a myth of women together and separate from men. Broumas looks to Greek myth and especially to Sappho to seek it out, Lorde to the Yoruba Vodun of ancient Dahomey, Rich to the lives of extraordinary women about whom history has been silent or naive, and Grahn to that which is common and ordinary in all women. *Lesbian* is also the essential outsider, woman alone and integral, who is oppressed and despised by traditional society, yet thereby free to use her position to re-form and remember. She is a figure both of the satirist and the seer, a woman of integrity and power who is by nature and choice at odds with the world. *Lesbian* is also erotic connection, the primary energy of the senses which is both physical and intellec-

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tual, connecting women, a woman with herself, and women through time. Finally, *lesbian* signifies a change of relationships, radical internal transformation; it is a myth of psychic rebirth, social redemption, and apocalypse.

It is certainly true that some of the values espoused by this new myth are not new—indeed they are the values we used to call "humane." But the traditional myth-language systems which purported to incorporate them have proven unable to support them, and indeed have become actively hostile to them. Yet the solution, as these poets see it, is not the expected Modern one of revitalizing the old myths. As far as women are concerned, many myths are deservedly vitiated because they have always embodied a fundamental oppressiveness which has now fully revealed itself in violent, death-devoted modern society. Only a new myth altogether, conceived along new lines, can reclaim the world which is lost (or that which never existed but should have). That, I believe, is the artistic logic which lies behind these poets' choice of subject matter for their visionary poems.

A crucial re-vision in this new mythic system concerns the relationship of the muse to the maker of poetry. The myth of the muse is a myth which deals with the source and nature of imaginative energy. The muse traditionally is female and the poet male. He addresses her in terms of sexual rapture, desiring to be possessed in order to possess, to be ravished in order to be fruitful. The language of violent sexual encounter, of submission and dominance, describes a relationship both of possession and enslavement. She comes and goes, mysteriously; he is utterly dependent upon her, worthless without her, yet she speaks only through him. She is wholly Other and strange, to use Simone de Beauvoir's category, a higher being in classical and Renaissance myth, an ethereally beautiful young girl in the tradition of romance. But whatever guise she assumes throughout history, the basic relationship of dominance and possession is constant between her and her poet.

In the myth of the Lesbian poets, the muse remains female. This completely changes the relationship of the poet to her poetry. Because the muse is female, she is not Other but Familiar, maternal and sororal, a well-known face in the poet's

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immediate community. Their relationship is not one of possession but of communal bonding. This myth seeks to recreate and remember wholeness, not through the domination of an Other which complements a gap or lack in the Self (as in Plato's egg myth, or the Oriental myth of Yin and Yang), but through a meeting of familiars which recalls a completeness that is present but forgotten or suppressed by history. Motifs and metaphors drawn from archaeology are frequent in Lesbian poetry, and the reason for this is obvious. They bespeak the recovery of a self that is deeply buried, unwritten, but recoverable as the poet, aided by a series of images embodying her muse, re-members herself in selves "who are come to make our shattered faces / whole," as Audre Lorde writes. By familiarizing the muse, Lesbian myth provides a way of seeing the poet in the woman, not as alien or monstrous, but as an aspect of her womanhood. It does not make the poetic calling any less difficult or special, but it focuses the difficulty where it really is—in the nature of her craft and individual talent, not her sex.

I will begin my particular discussion with Adrienne Rich because it is impossible not to. Adrienne Rich was an active influence in some way on all the other three writers. She has long been a friend and associate of Audre Lorde, she wrote the introduction to Judy Grahn's volume, and she is particularly acknowledged by Olga Broumas as an important poetic mother. Rich (b. 1929) has developed as a poet over a long period of time entirely within the established critical eye. As she has of late identified in her work the concerns I have called Lesbian, she has been disestablished by certain previous champions and virtually sanctified by some feminists, concurrent facts which, for all their unfairness to the poetry she actually writes, speak most eloquently for the success of her break with tradition. *The Dream of a Common Language* is probably the best introduction to the major themes and attitudes of Lesbian poetry. The poems are collected in three divisions, entitled (in order) "Power," "Twenty-One Love Poems," and "Not Somewhere Else But Here," and they constitute a complete statement pivoting on the sequence, "Twenty-One Love Poems."

The first section, "Power," is about the sources and frustrations of women's power. As she has often done before, Rich

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uses the life of a dead woman (Marie Curie, Elvira Shatayev) as a moral *exemplum* of woman under patriarchy, fragmented and cut off from the sources of her own power yet grasping towards it. Thus, Marie Curie "died a famous woman denying / her wounds / denying / her wounds came from the same source as her power." Her voice in these poems is meditative and homiletic, rising to a moral pitch which, while sometimes troubling to reviewers, is nothing new to American poetry. Rich would surely prefer that we think of Bradstreet and Dickinson, but I often also hear Robert Lowell in these poems.

Yet her relation to tradition, including the tradition of women, is an uneasy one. Perhaps this can best be seen in one poem in this first section, "Hunger," written for her friend, Audre Lorde. Though too long to quote in full, the following two sections state its essentials:

1.
A fogged hill-scene on an enormous continent,
intimacy rigged with terrors,
a sequence of blurs the Chinese painter's ink-stick planned,
a scene of desolation comforted
by two human figures recklessly exposed,
leaning together in a sticklike boat
in the foreground. Maybe we look like this,
I don't know. I'm wondering
whether we even have what we think we have—
lighted windows signifying shelter,
a film of domesticity
over fragile roofs. I know I'm partly somewhere else—
huts strung across a drought-stretched land
not mine, dried breasts, mine and not mine, a mother
watching my children shrink with hunger.
I live in my Western skin,
my Western vision, torn
and flung to what I can't control or even fathom.
Quantify suffering, you could rule the world.
. . . .
3.
We can look at each other through both our lifetimes
like those two figures in the sticklike boat

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flung together in the Chinese ink-scene;
even our intimacies are rigged with terror.
Quantify suffering? My guilt at least is open,
I stand convicted by all my convictions—
you, too. We shrink from touching
our power, we shrink away, we starve ourselves
and each other, we're scared shitless
of what it could be to take and use our love,
hose it on a city, on a world,
to wield and guide its spray, destroying
poisons, parasites, rats, viruses—
like the terrible mothers we long and dread to be.

This poem, it seems to me, deliberately recalls one of the most famous of Modern poems, Yeats's "Lapis Lazuli." The Chinese scene, the contrast of intimacy and domesticity with terrors and desolation, the contrast of East and West, and of art and political life, recall strongly both the occasion of Yeats's poem and its opposition between the Western "tragic" scene and the ancient gaiety of Eastern and artistic wholeness, captured in the Chinamen carved in stone. But Rich rejects Yeats's hope in transcendence to an ultimate order, even (perhaps especially) in art. She is one of those whom Yeats dismissed as "hysterical women," identifying in her poem the reverse side of Oriental asceticism and aestheticism: starvation, indifference, suppression of the weak, a world of "hunger" and constant, violent death.

Her moral indignation rises specifically against these things as the result of oppressive patriarchy:

that male god that acts on us and on our children,
that male State that acts on us and on our children.

Her poem certainly "misreads" the terms of Yeats's poem within a post-Vietnam, American context, but in the sense developed by Harold Bloom in *A Map of Misreading*. Rich recalls Yeats in order to force us to notice the differences, particularly with regard to the nature of art. The men in "Lapis Lazuli" see an ultimate order which underlies even tragedy, see that hunger and violence are insignificant before that order;

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it is the hysterical women who do not appreciate this and who insist, vainly, on trying to do something about it. Rich simply denies Yeats's suppositions. There is no order *per se* in art, suffering is not dignified, and the death of the helpless is neither indifferent nor benevolent. The comfort in Yeats's vision is illusory, and for men only. Rich's poem ends not with withdrawal into a world of fixed, aesthetic forms, but with an apocalyptic final statement of the necessity to bear a new world. The title of the last poem in this volume, "Transcendental Etude," recalls paradoxically the theme set forth in "Hunger," that transcendence comes in the embrace of daily life, and that art is nurtured within social life, to which it has obligations; it is not an alternative to society. The task of poetry, the dream of a *common* language, is epic—not romantic or "aesthetic."

Obviously, readers for whom Yeats remains the ultimate articulation of what poetry should be will be appalled by what seems to be Rich's disrespect for "art." Yeats himself, of course, was perfectly capable of moral indignation, but he was not apocalyptic; he accepted finally as inevitable both the male god and the male state, and the male art that legitimized, even while transcending, both. In starting from Yeats, Rich is claiming a privilege accorded to all young poets, that of the "anxiety of influence," to use another term from Harold Bloom. But this is no struggle of son against father for accommodation, to adjust power within an essentially unchanged structure. Just as the relationship of poet to muse is different for a woman, so is her relationship to tradition. In this instance, the woman poet accepts the role of the "hysteric," the outcast. She cannot simply make her fathers move over; she must make them, as Broumas calls them, "irrelevant." From this realization I think comes the apocalyptic conclusion of "Hunger" and the poet's daring to adopt a voice which is always uncomfortable, and these days unfashionable in the weary, self-deprecatory little rooms of some "postmodernism."

It interests me that so often in the poetry of the seventies, it is especially the Lesbian women who speak with the moral passion of seer and prophet. This is a significant new role as far as their audience is concerned. Part of the problem these

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women have in being heard is that they have taken to themselves an unaccustomed voice, that of epic. Aesthetic order in "Hunger" is seen as illusory, masking a crisis of humankind as cataclysmic and final as any Trojan war.

One sees this epic theme developing fully in the middle section of *The Dream of a Common Language,* but articulated in a form conventionally associated with intimate romance materials. "Twenty-One Love Poems" is modeled upon the traditional sonnet sequence, though Rich substitutes for technical sonnets poems varying between thirteen and twenty lines. They outline the story of a love affair, moving from union to estrangement, with the focus firmly upon the meditative "I" of the poet. This sequence is, as it traditionally has been, the love poetry of a conscious mind, for love is a disciplined and intelligent *social* art. It goes without saying that the lovers are women, and in her treatment of this subject lies the revolutionary nature of Rich's sequence. The world of the love affair is not "closeted," not closed off in romance; it is an epic world which shadows forth the destruction of an old order and the founding of a new. Her bold destruction of generic expectations is part of her apocalyptic theme; only in a completely new world, it suggests, can sonnets be used seriously for epic material.

From the beginning, the affair plays itself forward within a dying civilization:

> We need to grasp our lives inseparable
> from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those
> disgraces,
> and the red begonia perilously flashing
> from a tenement sill six stories high,
> or the long-legged young girls playing ball
> in the junior highschool playground.
> No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
> sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
> dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
> our animal passion rooted in the city.

It is the obligation of the poet, even in love, to "speak / to our life—this still unexcavated hole / called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world." The love affair is not an escape

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from the *civitas* (as it traditionally, at least since Dido, has been) but a means of redeeming it through the establishment of a new order:

> Your small hands, precisely equal to my own—
> only the thumb is larger, longer—in these hands
> I could trust the world . . .
> such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence
> with such restraint, with such a grasp
> of the range and limits of violence
> that violence ever after would be obsolete.

This is a vision of social and moral renewal, not of orgasmic transcendence, and it indicates the precise relationship for Rich between the bonding of women and social transformation. The Lesbian love bespeaks a new moral, social order, and if it seems to have more in it of hand-holding than of *liebestod*, that is precisely why Rich can make it the basis of an epic rather than the ending of a tragedy. It is significant that the sexual consummation poem is called "Floating," and can be read at any point in the sequence. As she writes,

> *Tristan und Isolde* is scarcely the story,
> women at least should know the difference
> between love and death.

The love affair ends as the lover goes off "in fugue," but its legacy is a self recognized as whole and creative, together with a vision of a new social order. The act of breaking from her lover, paradoxically, by leaving her alone brings her to realize her own power and value:

> I feel estrangement, yes. As I've felt dawn
> pushing toward daybreak.

She also realizes that the world in which she now lives is hostile not only to women but to bonding, *civitas*, of any sort:

> If I could let you know—
> two women together is a work
> nothing in civilization has made simple,

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two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness . . .
—look at the faces of those who have chosen it.

Yet the apparent loneliness is really a rebirth:

Can it be growing colder when I begin
to touch myself again, adhesions pull away? . . .
Am I speaking coldly when I tell you in a dream
or in this poem, *There are no miracles*?
(I told you from the first I wanted daily life,
this island of Manhattan was island enough for me.)

That life is sustained by the dream of community, a mythic place beyond history, "not Stonehenge / simply nor any place but the mind," where the poet, alone in a "shared" solitude of dawn, "the great light," chooses to draw her magic circle, in effect beginning civilization again. It is apparent that the relationship of the magic circle to the daily life of Manhattan exists only psychically, and by a struggle "heroic in its ordinariness."

"Twenty-One Love Poems" needs the final section of the volume, "Not Somewhere Else, But Here," to fulfill its epic theme by bringing the psychic theme into a social context, as the title of the section suggests. The last poem of this final section, "Transcendental Etude," seemingly ironic in its title since the poem ends with a non-transcendent scene of daily domesticity, articulates the *civitas* which in "Twenty-One Love Poems" remains only inner and potential, a dream. "Transcendental Etude" recounts a homecoming which is also a social re-vision, a Lesbian *Odyssey* (which, together with the earlier sequences, recalls an *Aeneid* too, in the pattern of fleeing a destroyed *civitas* hostile to its household deities, resisting the temptation of mere romance, and the climactic establishment of a new *civitas* in a new place):

to apprehend
in a sudden brine-clear thought
trembling like the tiny, orbed, endangered
egg-sac of a new world:

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This is what she was to me, and this
is how I can love myself—
as only a woman can love me.

Homesick for myself, for her—as, after the heatwave
breaks, the clear tones of the world
manifest: cloud, bough, wall, insect, the very soul of light:
homesick as the fluted vault of desire
articulates itself: *I am the lover and the loved,*
home and wanderer, she who splits
firewood and she who knocks, a stranger
in the storm, two women, eye to eye
measuring each other's spirit, each other's
limitless desire,
a whole new poetry beginning here.

At the end of this poem, Rich collapses the union of the two women lovers, muse and poet, into a single image of a woman alone in shared solitude, Penelope as Everywoman weaving the tapestry of the new poetry, the new civility:

bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps,
laying them out absently on the scrubbed boards
in the lamplight, with small rainbow-colored shells
sent in cotton-wool from somewhere far away,
and skeins of milkweed from the nearest meadow—
original domestic silk, the finest findings—
and the darkblue petal of the petunia,
and the dry darkbrown lace of seaweed;
not forgotten either, the shed silver
whisker of the cat,
the spiral of paper-wasp-nest curling
beside the finch's yellow feather.
Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity,
the striving for greatness, brilliance—
only with the musing of a mind
one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing
dark against bright, silk against roughness,
pulling the tenets of a life together
with no mere will to mastery,

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only care for the many-lived, unending
forms in which she finds herself.

She is a figure one has encountered before in Rich's poetry, an amalgam of those wounded heroes like Marie Curie, Elvira Shatayev, the "I" of "From an Old House in America," but in this poem she is not fractured or caged. Her world is whole and complex, uniting mind and body, society and nature, while preserving the integrity of all their forms.

The Lesbian *civitas* is a society predicated upon familiarity and likenesses, rather than oppositions. It is a world of daughters and mothers, of women in infinite variety discovering a language which celebrates their recovered energy and power. What is most troublesome in this image to the general public, of course, is its use of the lesbian bond to signify that wholeness, health, and integrity which are minimized or negated by the death-devoted sickness of male-inspired civilization. Yet the logic of this image is right, even necessary, to the task which these poets have set themselves. Poetic tradition has not given women a language in which they can readily imagine their lives with integrity and completeness. From muse to mother to mistress, women in poetry supply what is missing to men. They are the Other term in the universal dichotomy of oppositions between which the male universe swings, like Yeats's *gyres*. In rejecting the logic of opposition and the concomitant logics of dominance and submission, merging and transcendence, which so often accompany it, the Lesbian poets have created a world of likenesses by using and developing a myth at least potentially untainted by any previous tradition, because it has remained a taboo subject. In that very taboo lies their creative freedom.

Their world is also one of remnants, survivors who speak (or seek to recover) what Olga Broumas calls "the archaeology of an excised past" (*arkhé* + *logos* = "ancient speech"). Since tradition has fragmented women's lives, it has left only remnants, surviving with great difficulty and cut off from truthful speech. Hence the recurrent imagery of women as last survivors of an earlier time. Hence also the apocalyptic theme which is so strong in many of these poems. This follows logically from the perception that history has essentially

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excised women, except as they are related to men's lives and institutions. The belief in the need for imminent radical change in the order of things has traditionally belonged to groups who feel themselves to be permanently estranged from ordinary society. Eschatology is always radical rather than revolutionary in orientation. The distinction lies in whether one believes, as revolutionaries do, that change will occur through existing historical processes. Historical change for the revolutionary is essentially evolutionary, even when it appears abrupt. Eschatology, however, requires utter change, the end of all things as we know them, a new heaven and a new earth. It is a natural historical perspective for mystics and seers, for all those who by inclination and necessity do not vest their interest wholly in society but remain always in some way apart. The fact of her permanent estrangement is an essential ingredient of the Lesbian myth in its relationship to tradition, history, and the poetic process.

Olga Broumas (b. 1949) works more specifically than does Rich with traditional Greek myths. Yet her relationship to that tradition is radical. She deliberately strips these myths of their maleness, producing instead an entirely female world. In so doing, she takes the stance of an "archaeologist," discovering the fragments and remnants of a lost matriarchally-inspired language which was polluted and destroyed by later Greek patriarchy. *Beginning with O* announces at once that it is revising traditional myth. In "Twelve Aspects of God," the sequence which begins the volume, Broumas makes a startling revision in the very first poem of the myth of Leda. This myth of rape, a paradigm for the brutal male dominance of women, is changed to a myth of familiar, lesbian play. Broumas accomplishes this by making the swan female. By so doing she renders "the fathers" (surely including Yeats), who have spoiled love in their myth by associating it with power, authority, and domination, useless and impotent, having no place in the completely feminized version:

> The fathers are Dresden figurines
> vestigial, anecdotal
> small sculptures shaped
> by the hands of nuns. Yours

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crimson tipped, take no part in that
crude abnegation. Scarlet
liturgies shake our room, amaryllis blooms
in your upper thighs, water lily
on mine, fervent delta

the bed afloat, sheer
linen billowing
on the wind: Nile, Amazon, Mississippi.

History must be stripped away, as in the myth of "Io," another raped matriarch:

One would know nothing . . .
One would regret nothing . . .
One would keep nothing.

In place of the fathers is "the archaeology of an excised past," a mythic place populated by ancient gods who are embodiments of feminized power (for Broumas, recalling Greek usage, has chosen to make *god* a female noun). The muses, for example, do not visit or inspire her, they *are* her and her friends:

It's been said, we are of one mind.
It's been said, she is happy whom
we, of the muses, love.

Spiral Mountain: the cabin
full of our tools: guitar, tapedeck, video
every night

stars we can cast the dice by. We are
of one mind, tuning
our instruments to ourselves, by our triple light.

The description of an adequate myth is also the formation of a new language. Broumas, like Rich, uses the odyssey theme, especially in "Artemis," the concluding poem of "Twelve Aspects of God":

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Let's not have tea. White wine
eases the mind along
the slopes
of the faithful body, helps

any memory once engraved
on the twin
chromosome ribbons, emerge, tentative
from the archaeology of an excised past.

I am a woman
who understands
the necessity of an impulse whose goal or origin
still lie beyond me.

That goal is a language which is truthful, sensuous, and complete:

I work
in silver the tongue-like forms
that curve round a throat

an arm-pit, the upper
thigh, whose significance stirs in me
like a curviform alphabet
that defies

decoding, appears
to consist of vowels, beginning with O, the O-
mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound.
What tiny fragments
survive, mangled into our language.

Poor as they are, however, they are both the remnant and the foundation of a redemptive, apocalyptic myth:

I am a woman committed to
a politics
of transliteration, the methodology

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of a mind
stunned at the suddenly
possible shifts of meaning—for which
like amnesiacs

in a ward on fire, we must
find words
or burn.

For Broumas, as for the other Lesbian poets, lesbian love provides an image of psychic and social wholeness. Her Artemis is the sensuous, sexual muse and poet of the new world. Most often of all these poets, Broumas achieves a complexly articulate eroticism without vagueness or reticence. This is her most distinctive voice. Though she acknowledges her immediate poetic maternity in Plath, Woolf, Sexton, and Rich, it is clear that her ultimate and in a sense her most direct nurturing source is Sappho. Though the erotic theme is strong in *Beginning With O*, her most striking sequence of love-poems is a group of five, published only in a loose-leaf chapbook dated December, 1976 and called *Caritas*. She appropriated this theological word for love, she says, because she could find no other that had not been damaged by association with male sexual dominance. The poems of *Caritas* are an experiment in forging a language and myth of female sexuality:

A woman-made language would
have as many synonyms for pink/ light-filled/ holy as
the Eskimo does
for snow.

As much religious as erotic, these poems fuse profane and divine love, consciously exploiting the tradition of religious writing which we associate with St. Theresa of Avila and other female mystics (though its roots go back through Dante and St. Bernard of Clairvaux to *The Song of Songs*). For example, in Caritas #3 she describes her lover, who is, with the aid of a flashlight and speculum, contemplating the interior of her vagina and the cervical mouth:

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This flesh, my darling, always
invisible like the wet
side of stones, the hidden
hemisphere of the moon, startles you
with its brilliance, the little
dome a spitting
miniature of the Hagia Sophia
with its circlet of openings
to the Mediterranean Sun.

As the lover watches the "seething / of holiness . . . a tear / forms in the single eye, carmine / and catholic." It is a moment of adoration and of recognition, familiarity:

You too, my darling, are
folded, clean
round a light-filled temple.

These are not just visual but tactile poems, touch and taste being two senses which do not permit distance or detachment. They are filled with tongue and fingertips:

Imagine now
how your fingertips throb. You follow
the spinal valley, dipping
its hollow core like a ladle of light
in your ministering fingers.

The lovers' embrace is

like a finger inside
the tight-gummed,
spittle-bright, atavistic
suckle of
a newborn's fragile-lipped
mouth.

Love-making is a playful activity, each partner remaining throughout fully aware of self and other. There is no mystical

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swoon in these poems, and no "union" in the traditional sense. The speaker is always conscious and sentient. The emphasis is upon two together, not two made one—like a dance, a choric song. Thus, in Caritas #2 the speaker describes her lover's knees "dancing. Ecstatic as nuns / in their delirious habit," the orgasm "a choir / of sundial alarums." In the first poem,

> I lie
> between your sapling thighs, my tongue
> flat on your double-lips, giving
> voice, giving
> voice.

The sequence concludes:

> Laugh, lover, laugh
> with me. In that side-
> splitting reservoir, in the promised calm
> of its heaving waters, you'll
> bend, you'll see this woman's
> beautiful
> and familiar face.

Innocence, play, sentience, and familiarity are the marks of Broumas' erotic language. Her love poetry desires not *raptus*, the loss of self, but depicts union through recognition, through images of choir, dance, laughter, touch, of diverse yet familiar voices making sweet harmony. The tongue, organ of speech and consciousness, which in romantic tradition is opposite and inadequate to the desired unconscious *raptus* of sexual union, is in this new context an instrument both of sex and consciousness. In that fortunate Lesbian correspondence, Broumas lays the foundation of her myth, as these lines from the poem "Rumplestiltskin" in *Beginning With O* demonstrate:

> Tongues
> sleepwalking in caves. Pink shells. Sturdy
> diggers. Archaeologists of the right
> the speechless zones
> of the brain.

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Judy Grahn (b. 1940) is a love poet too, although her poetry is not particularly erotic. *The Work of a Common Woman* is sensual, but celebrates sweat and hard work rather than sexual play. Grahn is a "working-class poet," but she is neither a socialist-realist nor a slumming idealist. "Commonness" to her is not a new kind of exclusivity, for her "common woman" is Everywoman, that which is ordinary and common and binds women together. She is a love poet in the traditions of Whitman, Ginsberg, cummings, with more than a little bit of Gertrude Stein. Grahn borrows many of their repetitive, incantatory techniques, but transmutes them to celebrate the energy common to women in their diverse work. An example, from "She Who":

Carol and
her crescent wrench
work bench
wooden fence
wide stance . . .
Carol and her
new lands
small hands
big plans . . .
Carol is another
queer
chickadee
like me, but Carol does
everything
better
if you let her.

Her sensualness occurs in the dance-like, ritualistic patterns of much of her poetry. She seems able to find songs or enchantments in virtually every aspect of the language of women. "She Who," a group of diverse pieces which Grahn has recorded as well as published, contains a birth chant made from the midwife's instructions during natural childbirth, a funeral rite, an exorcism of all the hateful names that men have called women, a liturgy of heroic women evoked to give energy and to heal. These rituals, designed as Grahn writes, to make "our poetry what it should be and once was: specific,

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scientific, valuable, of real use," are interspersed with fables and *exempla*, the whole sequence resembling a Book of Common Prayer for women. Holding it all together is the powerfully evocative, syntactically polypositional "She Who." These poems are social activities, designed to replicate in readers, especially through reading aloud, the ideal of Lesbian civility.

Her most interesting and ambitious poem is the meditation, "A Woman is Talking to Death." Grahn has always insisted in her poems on what is factual, plain and simple. There are no obvious metaphors or myths. She has said of her early sequence, "The Common Woman": "I wanted to accentuate the strengths of their persons without being false about the facts of their lives." Of "A Woman is Talking to Death" she wrote, "This poem is as factual as I could possibly make it." The precise description of a fatal accident involving a motorcycle and an automobile on the Bay Bridge becomes an extended meditation on the futility of trying to work within a society fascinated by destruction. The poem clarifies sharply what women know of the difference between love and death; as Grahn says of it, it began "a redefinition for myself of the subject of love."

In this poem, the Lesbian "I" is ostracized, unwanted even when she tries to be conventionally helpful and socially constructive as a witness, a supporter of the police:

> that same week I looked into the mirror
> and nobody was there to testify;
> how clear, an unemployed queer woman
> makes no witness at all,
> nobody at all was there for
> those two questions: what does
> she do, and who is she married to?

Those on the inside, both predators and victims, state and citizen, are in collusion with death:

> there are as many contradictions to the game,
> as there are players.
> a woman is talking to death,
> though talk is cheap, and life takes a long time

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to make
right. He got a cheesy lawyer
who had him cop a plea, 15 to 20
instead of life
Did I say life?

the arrogant young man who thought he
owned the bridge, and fell asleep on it
he died laughing: that's a fact.
the driver sits out his time
off the street somewhere,
does he have the most vacant of
eyes, will he die laughing?

Her exclusion, she comes to realize, is her freedom, her life in the community of women who remove themselves from death and his society:

my lovers teeth are white geese flying above me
my lovers muscles are rope ladders under my hands
we are the river of life and the fat of the land
death, do you tell me I cannot touch this woman?
if we use each other up
on each other
that's a little bit less for you
a little bit less for you, ho
death, ho ho death.

Bless this day oh cat our house
help me not be such a mouse
death tells the woman to stay home
and then breaks in the window.

Society has outlawed the lesbian, "that's a fact." But so is the liberty and integrity which that fact bestows. The dead motorcyclist, the jailed driver, the indifferent police and courts, all linked in a brotherhood of death, lead the poet to remember her own collusion with "death" when, arrested by the military authorities for being a lesbian, she was ordered to be publicly ostracized and to betray her lovers:

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When I was arrested and being thrown out
of the military, the order went out: don't anybody
speak to this woman, and for those three
long months, almost nobody did; the dayroom, when
I entered it, fell silent til I had gone; they
were afraid, they knew the wind would blow
them over the rail, the cops would come,
the water would run into their lungs.
Everything I touched
was spoiled. They were my lovers, those
women, but nobody had taught us to swim.
I drowned, I took 3 or 4 others down
when I signed the confession of what we
had done together.

No one will ever speak to me again.

But realizing that even if she wants to be accepted, a lesbian cannot be for she is "unspeakable," her decision is to withdraw from death, being silenced becoming the occasion for a new articulateness:

ho and ho poor death
our lovers teeth are white geese flying above us
our lovers muscles are rope ladders under our hands
even though no women yet go down to the sea in ships
except in their dreams.

Thus the poetry of love is the poetry of work, of commonness, of fact set forth in song. Grahn's latest group of poems is an unfinished sequence, "Confrontations with the Devil in the Form of Love." The devil-love is romance, the myths of required self-sacrifice, possession and submission, "the Love dog scratching / at the door of my lonesomeness, / beating her tail against the leg / of my heart," a country-and-western-style parody of woman. But need is not love:

Don't misunderstand my hands
for a church with a steeple
open the fingers & out come the people;
nor take my feet to be acres of solid brown earth,

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or anything else of infinite worth
to you, my brawny turtledove;
do not get me mixed up with Love.

not until we have ground we call our own
to stand on
& weapons of our own in hand
& some kind of friends around us
will anyone ever call our name Love.

That place does not yet exist. What we have now is romance, "which is so much / easier and so much less / than any of us deserve."

Grahn idealizes but does not sentimentalize the Lesbian bond, because she makes us aware of the facts of aloneness, the penalties of her choice, and the tenuousness of her dream. She is also tough in rejecting the false securities and illusory paradises that romantic idealism produces. Grahn does not look to others to teach her love; her love comes with integrity. Love is a disciplined school of self-knowledge, self-valuation, learned through the world of work and fact. It is that discipline which underlies the apocalyptic dream defined in "A Woman is Talking to Death":

only the arrogant invent a quick and meaningful end
for themselves, of their own choosing.
everyone else knows how very slow it happens
how the woman's existence bleeds out her years,
how the child shoots up at ten and is arrested and old
how the man carries a murderous shell within him
and passes it on.

we are the fat of the land, and
we all have our list of casualties

to my lovers I bequeath
the rest of my life

I want nothing left of me for you, ho death
except some fertilizer
for the next batch of us

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who do not hold hands with you
who do not embrace you
who try not to work for you
or sacrifice themselves or trust
or believe you, ho ignorant
death, how do you know
we happened to you?

wherever our meat hangs on our own bones
for our own use
your pot is so empty
death, ho death
you shall be poor

Like Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde (b. 1934) has also produced a large body of poetry over an appreciable length of time. In her recent poems, including some in *Coal*, she has come to see in the bonding of women an image both of home and of a new world. *The Black Unicorn* (an image which richly summarizes the self-image of the poet) specifically develops the image of woman-bonding as a necessary start to the end of all forms of oppression. She writes in "Between Our Selves" of the selling into slavery of her pregnant great-grandmother:

Under the sun on the shores of Elmina
a black man sold the woman who carried
my grandmother in her belly
he was paid with bright yellow coin
that shone in the evening sun
and in the faces of her sons and daughters.
When I see that brother behind my eyes
his irises are bloodless and without color
his tongue clicks like yellow coins
tossed up on this shore
where we share the same corner
of an alien and corrupted heaven
and whenever I try to eat
the words
of easy blackness as salvation

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I taste the color
of my grandmother's first betrayal.

I do not believe
our wants
have made all our lies
holy.

In this "alien and corrupted heaven," Lorde speaks of loneliness and homelessness, fragmentation and lies, contrasted often to a vision of a new world which is also home. The odyssey theme is Lesbian—women together can figure forth home, the lover is the bridge, as in "Bridge through My Window," from *Coal*:

In curve scooped out and necklaced with light
burst pearls stream down my out-stretched arms to earth.
Oh bridge my sister bless me before I sleep
the wild air is lengthening
and I am tried beyond strength or bearing
over water.

Love, we are both shorelines
a left country
where time suffices
and the right land
where pearls roll into earth and spring up day.
Joined, our bodies have passage into one
without merging
as this slim necklace is anchored into night.

And while the we conspires
to make secret its two eyes
we search the other shore
for some crossing home.

The poem incorporates the prevalent image of remnant survivors in an alien country seeking to get home through their bond, which is both home, "the right land," and passage home.

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In creating her version of the Lesbian myth, Lorde draws upon Dahomeian religious myths, which are matriarchal in character, and ritual, in which women figure prominently. This mythic system provides a society of women, and it operates in Lorde's poetry much as the Greek myths do in Broumas', as a remembrance, an archaeology. For example, in "125th Street and Abomey," she invokes the mother-goddess:

> Head bent, walking through snow
> I see you Seboulisa
> printed inside the back of my head
> like marks of the newly wrapped akai
> that kept my sleep fruitful in Dahomey
> and I poured on the red earth in your honor
> those ancient parts of me
> most precious and least needed
> my well-guarded past
> the energy-eating secrets
> I surrender to you as libation . . .
> give me the woman strength
> of tongue in this cold season. . . .
>
> Seboulisa mother goddess with one breast
> eaten away by worms of sorrow and loss
> see me now
> your severed daughter
> laughing our name into echo
> all the world shall remember.

Her myth is also apocalyptic, as, for example, in these lines from "The Women of Dan Dance with Swords in Their Hands to Mark the Time When They were Warriors":

> I come like a woman
> who I am
> spreading out through nights
> laughter and promise
> and dark heat
> warming whatever I touch
> that is living

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consuming
only
what is already dead.

More so than her white fellows, Lorde takes violence as a central, dominant theme for her poetry. Seboulisa, the Dahomeian goddess, cut off one breast so that she might fight more easily, but violence is not always seen as so productive. Lorde's poetry is haunted by the images of the "children who become junk": the heroin-drugged girl of "My Daughter the Junkie on a Train," Donald DeFreeze, ten-year-old Clifford Glover who was shot by a white cop, the teenager in the poem "Power" who succumbs to "rhetoric" and rapes and murders an 85-year-old white woman "who is somebody's mother," the women who are "stones in my heart" because "you do not value your own / self / nor me."

But violence is the prerequisite for rebirth, the apocalypse necessary to create a new earth. Lorde often uses the Lazarus figure (seen as a woman) set free by an act of violence that bears her to a new and truer being. In "Martha," a poem from *Coal*, she meditates upon a former lover nearly killed in a car accident and her long recovery:

No one you were can come so close
to death without dying
into another Martha.
I await you
as we all await her
fearing her honesty
fearing
we may neither love nor dismiss
Martha with the dross burned away,
fearing
condemnation from the essential.

You cannot get closer to death than this Martha
the nearest you've come to living yourself.

It is instructive to compare this poem with Plath's "Lady Lazarus," a poem which ends with a terrible, avenging, disem-

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bodied self-image ("Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air"). Martha is more herself, more essentially embodied through violence and death than she was before: "Martha with the dross burned away." The experience of violence passes through death to peace discovered in an integrated self. It is a necessary part of healing, not merely cataclysmic but truly apocalyptic:

> The difference between poetry and rhetoric
> is being
> ready to kill
> yourself
> instead of your children.
>
> "Power"

For Lorde, as for all these Lesbian poets, the most important virtue—imaged by the female bond—is integrity: alienation and secrecy are reborn as the power of wholeness. The final poem of *The Black Unicorn*, "Solstice," expresses this process eloquently:

> My skin is tightening
> soon I shall shed it
> like a monitor lizard
> like remembered comfort
> at the new moon's rising
> I will eat the last signs of my weakness
> remove the scars of old childhood wars
> and dare to enter the forest whistling
> like a snake that has fed the chameleon
> for changes
> I shall be forever.
>
> May I never remember reasons
> for my spirit's safety
> may I never forget
> the warning of my woman's flesh
> weeping at the new moon
> may I never lose
> that terror

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that keeps me brave
May I owe nothing
that I cannot repay.

Yet integrity is not isolation. Because it is constructed through sharing and bonding, through seeing the selves in others, recognizing and recovering them, it leads to a truly civilized and social vision of being. Lorde, like the other three poets under discussion, never withdraws. Her African archaeology is firmly attached in Harlem, where it transforms and redeems. Because her muses are so intensely familiar and intimate (even when cloaked in the myth of a distant Dahomeian goddess), she can present her poetic faces whole, the myth and the life, the self and civility:

Between the canyons of their mighty silences
mother bright and father brown
I seek my own shapes now
for they never spoke of me
except as theirs
and the pieces I stumble and fall over
I still record as proof
that I am beautiful
twice
blessed with the images
of who they were
and who I thought them once to be
of what I move
toward and through
and what I need
to leave behind me
most of all
I am blessed within my selves
who are come to make our shattered faces
whole.

"Outside"

In summary, Lesbian poetry celebrates integrity as the metaethic of civilization. Virtually all its images—those of apocalypse, exile, fragmentation, re-cognition, familiarity, and

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bonding—are ingredients of a vision of personal wholeness and truth. Muse, mother, lover are familiars who come together in an integrated psyche, the Lesbian magic circle. More radical than this psychic myth, however, is their social one, the ethic of Lesbian civility, especially as it links themes such as exile and odyssey with apocalypse and redemption (the influence of Mary Daly may be crucial in defining this link, though her *Gyn/Ecology* is virtually contemporaneous with the volumes discussed in this essay). The Lesbian psyche is not simply reborn or rediscovered, it is redeemed and redemptive. Lazarus (often in disguise) is an important figure for Judy Grahn in "A Woman is Talking to Death" as well as for Audre Lorde in "Martha," and Broumas' Greek deities are not merely reconstructed but transfigured. Marie Curie, the wounded heroine, is redeemed by the woman of "Transcendental Etude." Lesbian redemption is not transcendent, however; it never loses its historical embedding in the world of "fact" so important to Judy Grahn, the world of Harlem and island of Manhattan. The epic dimension of their poetry distinguishes these four poets absolutely from their immediate "confessional" precursors, especially Plath and Sexton. Their lives and times are embodied in their work together with an apocalyptic "time-tension," the unspoken Lesbian past and the ineffable Lesbian future bearing continuously upon the present. In achieving their epic theme, the familiarization of the muse by the Lesbian poet is essential, for it is that crucial metaphoric relationship which makes the woman at home in the poet, able to create new worlds through the power of an integrated self.

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JOHN FINLAY

The Wide Porch

for M. C. F.

Where nothing can be other than it was,
I hold the house as solid in my mind
As it had been before it was destroyed.
Standing in sycamore, live-oak and pine,
Still the seasons soak its holding frame.

Susanquas blooming in the winter sun,
Air cool inside like water from a well
As summers scorched and flaked old paint,
Fall rains sounding in the rooms all night,
These laved and filled the backward mind.

I see our family on the wide porch,
In sun that thickens to a wilderness—
The upper columns seethed in summer bees—
And know the past encoded in the blood
As deaths perfected it and sealed it up.

I swept away the clotted leaves and dirt
From graves my uncle took me out to clean.
The massive autumns drunk in their own seed,
Staining the chilled slabs, nothing underneath—
I then moved outward to become myself.

She who last lived there, finally alone,
Died terrified, flesh holding on to flesh.
No cries came when that agony had ceased.
We closed her eyes, transfixed in nothingness,
Then left her covered in the naked light.

I left the house. The sun was rising keen

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In burning fog away from each bright leaf.
A swimmer coming out of blinding salt,
I stared where trees stood rooted in a world
Brutal and calming in the clearing sun.

The Archaic Athena

Small owls in the spring nights
Whirr through pines below her shrine.

The new-skinned snake sleeps
Full-fed in its temple cage.

Her wooden statue washed in the sea
Gazes through foam of the moon.

Wisdom knows the grasping root
Ending as thinnest hair in waters

Held pure and trembling in a well.

Death in Asia Minor

At a Coastal Shrine in the Second Century

Indigo feathers of the slaughtered cocks,
Against white marble, blacken in the chill
Late afternoon. A priest will burn them soon
Within the precincts of this god who dies.
The bowls, the whetted sacrificial knives,
Already washed of blood, gleam in the studs

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With sunlight failing in the circled shrine.
The bearded image, with the dog and snake,
Stares lidless at the columned yard outside,
Where frost is thickening on the bare ground.
Water brims, nervously is poised in pools
Fed by the springs erupting underneath.
Below the cliffs, the winter sea cries out,
The shrine invaded by the constant sound,
Which subtly mounts into the brain to make,
In them, at night, entranced within the god,
Low undertows of noise.
The few inside,
Who stay all night, have purified themselves,
In thinnest water cleaned demonic flesh.
They lie, provided knives, on narrow beds,
Locked inside a room sealed off from light,
Sifting dissolving fragments of the brain
To find this distant god, who comes in blind
Destruction of the mind. Each strains to be
The shipless winter sea, or timeless fire
That eats itself alive, the human knot
Dissolved or burnt, in water or in fire.
The eldest dreams again he hears the wind
Crying in frozen trees, before the dawn,
When he had stared, abstracted, at the tide—
The whole wave pulled to pieces by the moon—
Then bled himself, according to the dream
Wherein the god had spoken through the wind.
As he awakes, though blind as when he slept,
The thawing sun, which smokes itself into
A frozen world, lies cindered in his mind.
He stands on ice and sees the nervous threads
Of blood, again, unskeining from the gash.
The dawn repeats the sea, now leveled flat,
Solid in livid blue, like trembling slag,
The broken banks, the cries of preying gulls.
The rind of self now burning in the god,
Nothing reclaims his gutted mind, a skull
Soon cleaned, the body drained, cast in a grave
To break and darken, costing him no pain.

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DOROTHY ROBERTS

The Poets of Home

I in my age am sent
the poems of the dead
who are melted down to themselves

who lie in the thin wafers
who are holy and consumed for love

who are back in their time
who are in their native land
or journeying to return

They are over and done with
so they can return to be
the next people's splendor

I envy them their breath that is not
I envy them no tomorrow
I envy them the poem grown like a flower
that shall be picked by everyone
that passes and the native
land of their dust

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PATRICIA SHEPPARD

The Commuter's Poem

Glint of gold and gold gilt grey,
these unending prairie grasses
along the banked side of the commuter highway,
mornings and afternoons,
all fall and a mild winter into spring,
are the continuation of my desire
those days when we have had to alter our nakedness,
putting on woolen suits to go to work in different cities.

Often the wind will lay the grasses back on the ground.
With the same motion, you comb your hair,
a shock of sun, backlighted, as you turn to me,
your hair the color of these grasses,
pale panned gold, a hint of red,
greyed, partially whitened after summer.

We found ourselves under the deep green pine,
lying on just these prairie grasses,
your hair falling back on our bed of grass.
We arced to the enormous explosions of the stars and suns,
from matter to energy and back and forth,
like the blurred flight of angels,
a transformation as complete and as continuous
as one moment following the next.
I want to say to you as clearly
as the sun's magnificence lights these simple grasses,
my life is a beautiful thing to me now.

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GILBERTO PEREZ

Atget's Stillness

INSTEAD OF ARRESTING MOVEMENT, photography in Atget's hands often seems to animate stillness. Three stone cupids, perched up on a molding inside a Mansart chateau, give a peculiar impression of animation as photographed by Atget. This doesn't simply derive from the sculptor's animation of the stone; it isn't an impression we would get in person, quite in this way; rather it is one, to a decisive extent, created in the photograph. Not created by any sort of trickery or distortion: Atget never went in for that. His pictures are dispassionate, limpid, sharp of focus, precisely detailed. He saw himself as a documenter of traditional French culture, and was evidently paying his respects to Mansart by photographing that beautiful interior. How, then, does the document become creation? Observe the play of light in the photograph. The light enters through an unseen window or door to the right, and it shines brightly on the floor, on much of the wall, and on the balustrade of a staircase directly below the cupids; but it leaves the cupids themselves half-enveloped in darkness. It reaches them most brightly at the tiny overhanging legs of the central cupid, whose head, as if responding to the sunshine, awakened by it from the slumber of stone, is turned to the right. All this was there, of course, none of it Atget's invention, but by seizing on this conjunction of sun and statues he creates the sense that the cupids are being beckoned out of darkness by the sun, that from their immobility they're being aroused into life.

This isn't an impression we would get in a painting either, quite in this way. A painting's stillness differs in nature from a photograph's. A photograph freezes time, and hence intrinsically proposes movement. Whereas a painting is still to begin with, and may convincingly depict or suggest movement but always out of still materials, a photograph begins with the mobility, or at least potential mobility, of the world's materials, of the things reproduced from reality, and turns that into a still image. More readily than in a painting, we see things in a photograph, even statues, as being on the point of movement, for those things belong to this world of flux from which the image has been extracted. The stone cupids won't move, of course, but the sun that seems to be stirring them will, as will innumerable other things in their surroundings, as have the sun and innumerable other things over all the years in which the cupids have been poised up there. Mansart built that chateau, of

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Maisons-Laffitte, Château (1910)
All photographs reproduced here courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Abbott-Levy Collection. Partial gift of Shirley C. Burden. Exhibition: The Work of Atget: The Art of Old Paris. October 14, 1982–January 4, 1983.

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Maisons-Laffitte, near Paris, in the 1640s, when Louis XIV was a boy crowned king. By suggesting the cupids' animation, Atget animates their history in our minds, puts us, as it were, into their time scale—much slower than ours, but much faster than the sun's, though the sun keeps rising and setting while they remain immobile.

A Romanesque arch, gate to a town, is at the center of another Atget photograph (not reproduced here). Shown frontally from a distance, this archway lets us see into a greater distance: through it, far in back, houses are visible, and on the cobbled road some barely discernible specks appear to be townspeople. In many of his photographs Atget employs this kind of long perspective, leading the eye into the recesses of a background that is busier or brighter or in any case intriguing, a background usually unblurred yet all the more mysterious for that. Focusing, as here, on settings characteristically empty or almost empty of people, these long perspectives are a favored strategy by which Atget animates stillness, intimates the movement of history through a place. The eye travels into the distance along a path where, at the moment, all is quiet: if somebody were seen, prominently, in the midst of some activity, the photograph would likely tend to the merely anecdotal, a record of just that, happening now; and the eye, caught by that, wouldn't glide as it does into the depths. Right now nobody travels along the eye's path, but innumerable people have traveled here, and the very air seems to become charged with their accumulated activity, their unseen felt presence. Walter Benjamin likened Atget's pictures to investigative records of scenes of crime, and they indeed convey the feeling that something crucial has happened here, or is sure to happen—a feeling made all the stronger because nothing is happening just now. Atget's work may persuade us that, for still photography, still subjects are the best, since, not drawing us into the momentary, they can best be made to evoke the diverse dimensions of movement. Devoted to stillness, Atget was the most historical of photographers, and perhaps the greatest.

In the archway photograph another important factor contributes to the feeling of animation. A thick dark vine, shaped like the roof of a house, like the thatching on a cottage, covers the top of the town gate, and makes the gate as a whole look like the front of a cozy cottage, with the archway as the door and the town beyond as the interior. This conjunction of plant and stones suggests a happy marriage between them: as if in tender accord, they seem to be keeping house together, that house being the town they jointly front. Granted, Atget was lucky to have found this suggestive sight—all photographers depend on luck, on the kindness of those strangers which are the world's sights—but the effect of a house depends as well on his calculated camera placement, frontal to the

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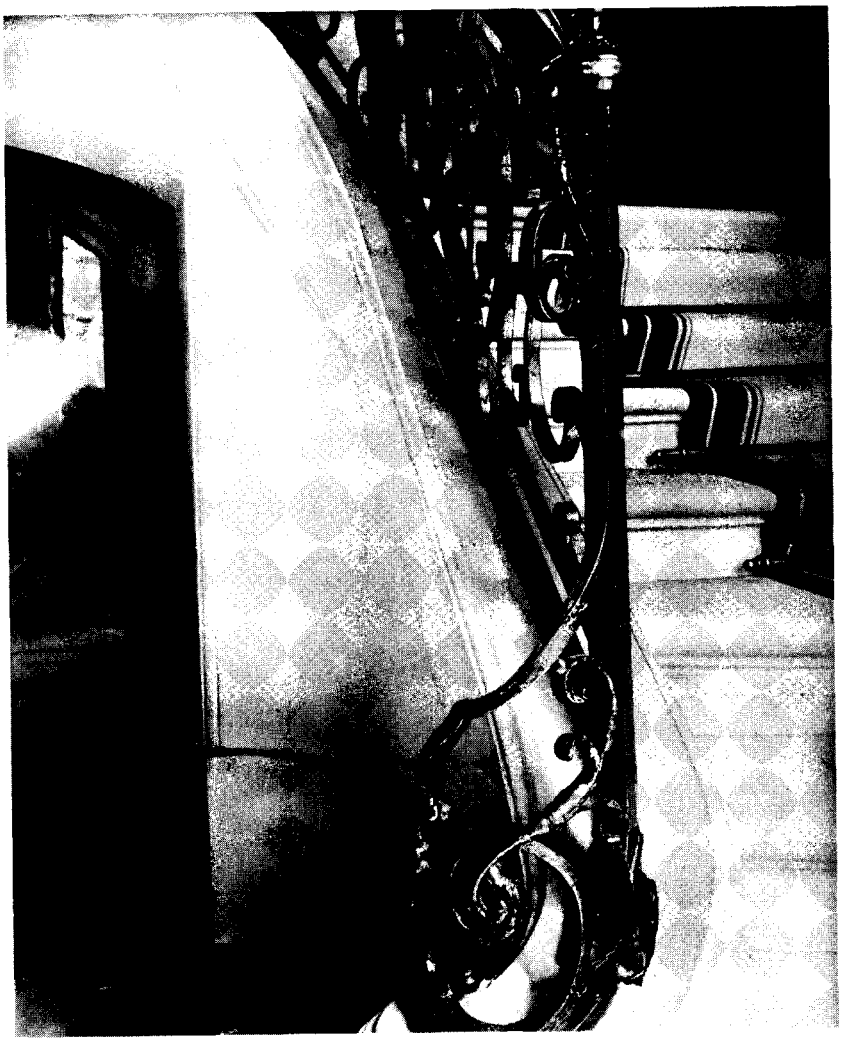

Folie Thoinard, 9 rue Coq-Heron (1909–10)

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arch and sufficiently far from it to make it look not imposing but homelike. Unlike the cupids, these stones don't give an impression of arousal but rather one of tranquillity; by the effect of a house, however, Atget likewise invests them with a human quality, the tranquillity seeming not inanimate but snugly domestic. Here again he leads us to enter, imaginatively, into the time scale of the stones, by seizing on a conjunction that seems to bring that scale closer to our own. And the conjunction of vine and arch, like that of sun and cupids, juxtaposes two time scales as different from each other as they both are from ours. Alive on the old Romanesque stones, the vine, like the sun, proposes a quicker rhythm, makes us think of mutability and the cycles of nature; but it also, like the sun, puts us in mind of an order far more ancient than the stone structure.

Doorways and staircases are frequent Atget subjects: places imbued with transition, with entrances and exits, ascents and descents, and shown by him during a spell of quietness. One photograph (see preceding page) combines a door with a staircase, the door cut off by the left edge of the frame, the staircase by the right and top edges—Atget's edges are incisive—while the lines of the staircase's wrought-iron railing undulate down the middle and, near the bottom, swerve toward the door, whose glass partition spottily reflects the street outside. In and out, up and down, left and right, the ensemble reverberates with implied passages.

Another photograph shows the front doorway to a Paris building: a large symmetrical double door vertically divided into four equal parts—or rather, not quite equal, since this vertical pattern is varied in the bottom half, where, on each side, are the two smaller doors that normally provide access into the building. Of these the left-hand door is now shut; the other, open. On the left outer molding a small sign is posted announcing an apartment to let. The photograph's frontal perspective and centered composition preserve the doorway's symmetry—except for two elements breaking that symmetry: the posted sign and, more strikingly, the open right-hand door, which lets us see into a deep courtyard where another door is open in back. By this double asymmetry, and by the mostly flat, then abruptly deep, space, a current seems to be generated that flows from the sign on the left through the open door on the right to the door in back and into the darkness beyond. What kind of life, we may wonder, would we have led had we been there and rented that unseen apartment and passed every day through those doors? And there is a further twist that makes this a truly extraordinary photograph. On the open side the door in back and its adjoining wall cut exactly halfway through the open door in front, thereby reasserting, on that side, the vertical pattern of four equal parts that the designer varied—which intimates that even in openness, in the depths of contingent life, certain strict patterns impose themselves.

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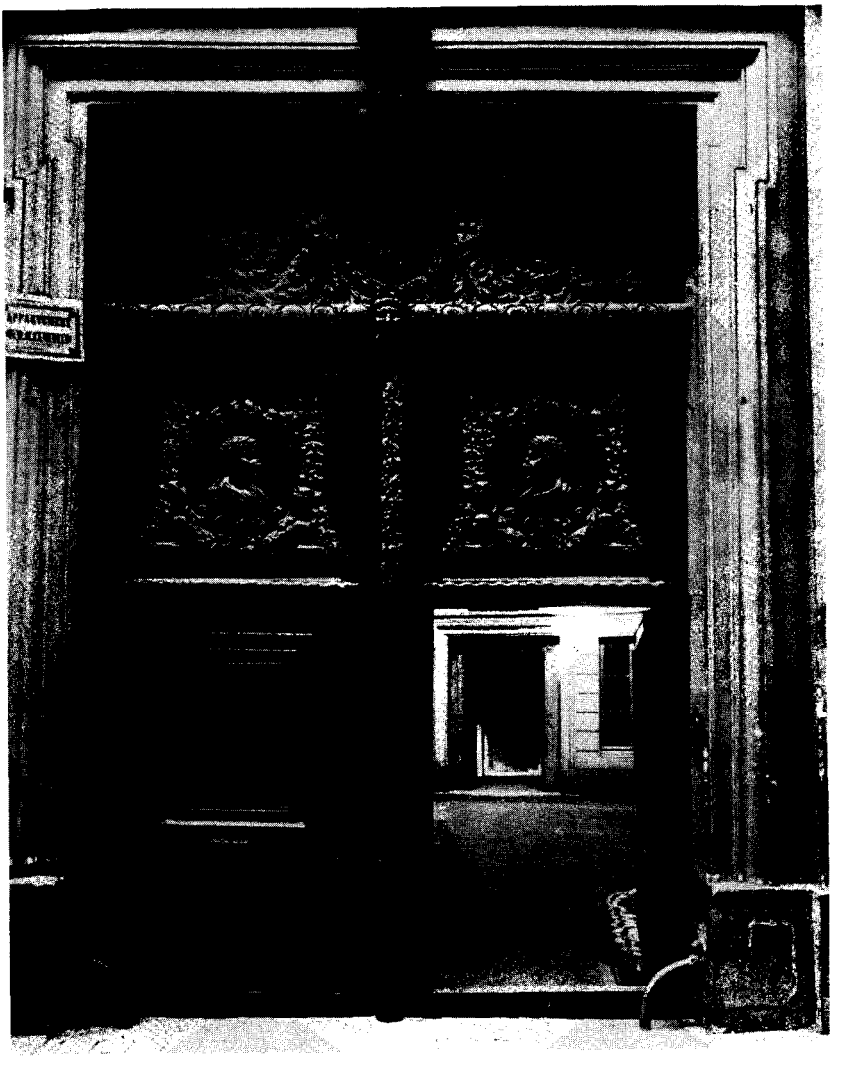

Hôtel des Archevêques de Lyon, rue St.-André-des-Arts, 58

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A dialectic of pattern and contingency informs Atget's work. Photography at its best embraces the contingent; its attempts at a manufactured pictorialism have rarely been of much interest. As compared with painting, photography can do little to create meaningful pattern; but Atget the documenter had a keen eye for the kind of meaningful pattern that photography can create. Most of the pattern in his picture of that doorway was already there, in the doorway's design; and yet, by the broken symmetry combined with the reasserted vertical pattern, the photograph achieves an eloquent statement of its own.

In architecture, the art that interpenetrates with life, erecting structures traversed by history, embodying a give and take between abstract design and concrete circumstance, Atget found the subjects most suitable to his concerns. His landscapes are on the whole less compelling than his pictures of architecture; photographic landscapes, such as the pompous platitudes of an Ansel Adams, tend to be uncompelling, for the medium lacks painting's (or film's) powers of organization, and before nature it often succumbs either to muddle or to cliché; generally it does better with subjects that are human, human-made, or human-marked, subjects that already carry human signs. Although architecture, more than painting or sculpture, is diminished as an art by photographic reproduction—because it loses its space and scale and three-dimensionality: what photograph can even begin to do justice to Borromini's cupola at St. Ivo?—as a subject of photography architecture has much to offer, because it offers pattern in the midst of life. Few photographers have realized this potential as Atget did.

Eugène Atget (1857–1927) was little known during his lifetime. Born near Bordeaux, he mostly photographed in or near Paris, having been a sailor, a soldier, and an actor, before he took up photography around 1890, and from then on he made a living from photography until his death, though he also tried his hand at painting. His photographs found a market with artists who wanted records of picturesque sites, with official agencies, and with private collectors of views of old Paris, which Baron Haussmann and his Napoleonic boulevards had gone some ways toward destroying and which Atget made a specialty of photographing. He never photographed Haussmann's boulevards: those long perspectives he did not care for. He never photographed the Eiffel Tower either, or the Arc de Triomphe: a humble old corner or alley suited him much better. He seems to have been of an antiquarian cast of mind, to have thought of photography principally as a means not for capturing the present but for preserving the past. Although most of his photographic work falls into the twentieth century, his methods and equipment remained those of the nineteenth, while his gaze reached further back in time. Working in an unclassical medium, he upheld the values of the classical French tradition (though not

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especially its aristocratic side: his sympathies, it appears, were democratic). And yet, for all the serenity and clarity and restraint in his photographs, there is that sense in them of scenes of crime—which reminds us that the French, those most measured of people, also had the bloodiest revolution. Perhaps the French invented modernism, with Baudelaire and Manet, because their classicism was so willfully achieved: during construction at Maisons-Laffitte, Mansart had parts of the building torn down as he restlessly revised his ideal scheme. Whereas the art of a Raphael or Bramante is truly serene, the classicism of a Poussin or Mansart or Racine has about it something manic, an undertone of frenzy that the formalization keeps rigorously in harness. In upholding the French tradition, Atget also exposes its contradictions.

A comprehensive retrospective of Atget's work, in four parts, is being mounted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.[1] In his catalogue essay on Atget, John Szarkowski begins by comparing "the art of photography to the act of pointing." As Peirce himself noted when setting up his theory of signs, photography is indexical by virtue of its physical connection with the things it reproduces; and it is also indexical because, in reproducing those things, it points to them, as with a finger.[2] The frame and the linear perspective that photography took over from painting are pictorial pointers, and the new medium applies them directly to life. Photography's index finger, however, is one that holds what it points to in place forever. Choosing some sight from reality, telling us to look at that, from this angle, within this frame, it puts us in the unreal position of having all the time we may want for the looking. Photo-

[1] Two installments of this retrospective have been exhibited: "Old France" and "The Art of Old Paris," accompanied by corresponding catalogues. General title: THE WORK OF ATGET. Catalogues by *John Szarkowski* and *Maria Morris Hambourg*. $40 each. The Museum of Modern Art, New York; distributed by New York Graphic Society, Boston. Two more parts are forthcoming: "The Ancien Régime" and "Modern Times."

[2] My use of a footnote here, directing your attention to the bottom of this page, is an instance of an index. "My," "here," "your," and "this," in the previous sentence, are other instances. One hears it said, by people who misunderstand Peirce, that photography is indexical whereas painting is iconic: both, in fact, are both. An icon, in Peirce's sense, is a sign that resembles its object, which all pictures do that recognizably represent things. An index is a sign, to quote Peirce, "which refers to its object . . . because it is in dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand . . . " A weather vane is an index, as is a footprint, as is the imprint of light chemically received in a photograph; but indices aren't confined, as some suppose, to such physical traces or natural marks. Linguistic indices abound. A pronoun is an index because it connects with an antecedent, or a speaker, or a listener: pronouns point. And the frame, either in a painting or in a photograph, also points: it is a salient example of a pictorial index that long antedated photography. Linear perspective, which directs the eye along certain paths in the picture, is another such example. "Anything," Peirce wrote, "which focusses the attention is an index."

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graphs are such familiar images that we may not recognize how peculiar is their combination of real space with unreal time. It was, above all, in the way he exploited this peculiar combination that Atget showed himself a master.

Consider a picture he took of the Paris Mint. Flanked by three squat stanchions, the steps to the building, which is shown from the side, are seen to converge straight down the middle of the picture, tracing strong dynamic lines of one-point perspective and leading the eye to an open door, far in back, at which a man stands. Atget's choice of perspective is crucial here: rather than at the man's eye level, the vanishing point is knee-high, at stanchion level, as if the picture were giving us the point of view of the stone posts. Across the lines of the steps, the three stanchions—one on the left foreground, another just a little farther back on the right, the third way in the background, close to the man—seem to be conducting an active exchange among themselves. When the eye, along the course traced by the steps, comes to the man in back, it rises with him, but doesn't stop at his height, for he stands at a door which rises high above him and which, together with the building's tall columns on the left and with another door on the right, brings the vertical dimension into architectural play as the stanchions and the steps bring the horizontal ones. Here again, chiefly by that stanchion's-eye side perspective on the broad flight of steps, Atget invests stones with a feeling of animation. As still as they, the man in back seems to stand at the intersection of those larger time scales by which a building lives, or a city, or a culture.

Atget may call to mind that other great photographer of a culture, August Sander, also devoted to stillness. Sander made a catalogue of the Germans by having people in different walks of life pose for him, assume for his camera a social pose: they stood before it, motionless, in a public gesture of self-definition. Not surprisingly, the Nazis banned that catalogue. Sander photographed people; Atget, places; Atget's places, however, capture the spirit of a people.

Time in most photographs is confined to the scale of the instant, the moment at which the camera shutter was snapped open—snapped by a proud parent taking pictures of the children, or by a news photographer, or, to venture into the higher reaches of photographic art, by Cartier-Bresson setting down his "decisive moments" anywhere in the world he has roamed on his private means. But photography, freezing time, freezes equally all kinds of time. The images it produces accord the same status to the brisk and the prolonged, the transient and the enduring, the periodic and the historical. Time's various currents and cycles are all halted together in a strange democracy of stillness. Atget's unrushed eye, disdaining the fleeting moment, activating stillness, can set the currents running, the cycles circling, in our imaginations.

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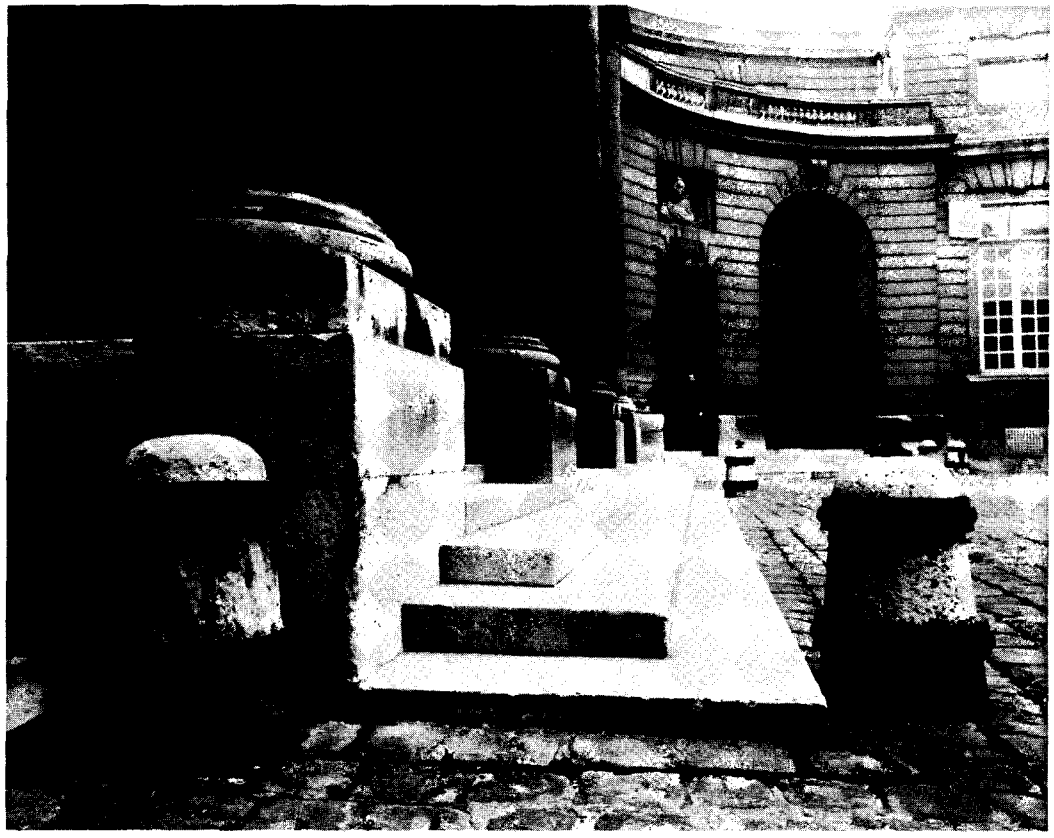

La Monnaie, quai Conti (1905–06)

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CHARLES W. MILLARD

Jackson Pollock

JACKSON POLLOCK'S EARLIEST PICTURES show in embryo many of the characteristics that informed his art throughout his career. *Self Portrait* of 1930–33, for instance, is characterized by an intensity, an interest in monumental scale, and an awareness of the more experimental art of its time, in this case that of such Mexicans as Siqueiros, that Pollock was never to lose. It also exemplifies the contradictions and difficulties, amounting at times to perversity, that seem to have been the necessary ground out of which Pollock's art grew. For all its ambitions of scale and expressiveness, *Self Portrait* is a tiny picture worked almost like a miniature, its ground carefully laid on in several layers, its rich, monochrome chiaroscuro evidencing a complex technique. *Woman*, of the same date, is somewhat more relaxed, building its forms not so much by careful shading as by the contrast of subdued white against rich brown. The result is a decorative flattening of form which is enhanced by the curious, skull-like stylization of the heads that also characterized the work of such contemporaries of Pollock as Clyfford Still.

In the succeeding four years, 1934–38, Pollock's painting began to allow color, suppressed in the early efforts, to speak with greater clarity, and clearly showed his debt to Albert Pinkham Ryder. *Seascape* (1934), for example, is wholly in Ryder's spirit, both in subject and style. Its tiny sailboat, heading from a choppy sea toward a rocky shore, seems threatened not so much by its immediate surroundings as by the overwhelming sky, a flame-like passage of subdued reds, browns, oranges, and blue-greens. Similarly, the composition of *Going West* (1934–38) is dominated by Orphic upheavals, although its subject is entirely derived from Pollock's master Thomas Hart Benton. Hills and sky are swept into a swirling oval pattern that draws the attention away from the edges of the canvas toward its center, something that typified many of Pollock's works at this time. These dense, compacted, and impastoed compositions are apotheosized in *The Flame* (1934–38), in which lambent, broadly linear passages of red, yellow, modulated white, brown, and black structure an abstract picture that tends toward the all-over while still focusing toward its center. A not entirely successful effort to give greater clarity and more apparent coherence to such conceptions is represented by *Composition with Figures and Banners*, in which the straight black poles of the banners are placed rhythmically across the canvas. *Overall Composition* accomplishes somewhat the

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same thing by breaking its brushstrokes into smaller, more discrete units, and also de-emphasizes the center in its even distribution of color and value across the pictorial surface and its willingness to let the strokes themselves organize the picture rather than having a broader pattern imposed on them. Finally, *Panel with Four Designs* (1934–38) lets color speak clearly by being isolated at fairly high value in long, curving, and discrete lines drawn against a dark ground. Efforts at modeling are here almost wholly abandoned in favor of clarity of drawing in a decorative composition that encourages its elements to acknowledge the shapes of the four panels of which it is composed.

In the years around 1940, Pollock's art broke through from its experimental beginnings into the large-scale mature effort it became in 1942–43, moving away from centered compositions toward even distribution of form across the surfaces of increasingly long rectangular canvases. In *Man, Bull, Bird* and *Naked Man with Knife*, both of 1938–41, it exploits a shallow overlapping of broadly conceived forms derived from the Cubism of such muralists as Orozco. Heavily or brightly colored shapes, densely compacted, give these compositions little chance to breathe, unlike their delicately shaded ancestors of French analytic Cubism. Like those ancestors, however, a black linear structure, thickened well beyond the filament Cubism preferred, begins to give unity to their disjunctive forms. Color reaches almost hallucinatory intensity in *Circle*, with its aggressive juxtapositions of red, yellow, blue, and green; and bright color and overall linear structure are successfully married in the abstracting *Birth*. A dense arrangement of circular shapes within a strongly vertical rectangle, *Birth* uses an infrastructure of white line and shape to embrace its Picassoid forms. This infrastructure tends to cling to the canvas surface, while the colored shapes it frames are carved out within it in a shallow space made opaque by their colors and juxtapositions. Some relief is given by Pollock's use of a soft gray-blue, but in general the picture is a remarkably successful example of the pictorial congestion that had characterized such earlier efforts as *Overall Composition*. Along with the wholly uningratiating nature of its forms and color, this suggests the compulsiveness by which one senses Pollock was driven and which gives his art the character of something wrenched from the elements of which it was composed rather than that of something harmoniously developed. Indeed, an effort at softer color and more open composition—*Naked Man* of 1938–41—is a conspicuous failure alongside *Birth*.

The plateau reached by Pollock's painting in 1942–43 depends, at least in part, on a general relaxation and opening up of form, although unsubtle color continued to intensify and linear structure to become more elaborate. It is almost as if the horrors of war, which worked to the detriment of other artists' output, externalized the violent intensity within Pollock, relieving him momentarily of the

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necessity of objectifying it in his art. *Stenographic Figure*, of about 1942, is indeed almost whimsical in the freedom with which its calligraphy cavorts across the surfaces of the colored planes arranged behind it. This detachment of drawing from structure—for the picture is structured by broader drawing between the calligraphy and the color planes and by the intersections of the planes themselves—is rare for Pollock, and was further exploited by him in *Composition with Pouring II* of 1943. The most thoroughly abstract of his pictures of these years, *Composition with Pouring II* exploits a type of facture explored by Hans Hofmann in such pictures as *Spring* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1943). Broad color areas, applied largely without inflection, form a ground across which color that contrasts in hue and/or value is dripped. Running off the canvas at its edges, both the areas and the drips suggest a composition of much greater scope than is actually present. Whether Pollock was aware of Hofmann's drip experiments, or those of anyone else, is irrelevant to the quality of his art. The fact that he might have been aware of them, however, suggests how quickly and thoroughly he assimilated the influences that helped shape him, including those of Ryder and the Mexicans. Unlike Gorky, who worked through his influences slowly and surrendered to them altogether, Pollock transformed what he took almost instantaneously, bending it to his own purposes and making it all but invisible in his art.

The openness suggested by *Stenographic Figure* is pursued in *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle*, the eponymous forms of which are arranged against an uninflected blue ground. Both this blue and the red of many of the forms are raised to high intensity, and the larger surface forms are separated from one another, their interstices decorated with an open, linear calligraphy. If the scale and openness of *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* are prophetic, however, pictures such as *The Guardians of the Secret* and *Male and Female* are more typical of the time. While both also have a good deal of free-floating calligraphy, each is structured internally by a series of rectangles more or less congruent with the overall shape of the canvas. In *The Guardians of the Secret*, these rectangles contain particular shapes or colors or types of facture, while in *Male and Female* barriers tend to break down and shapes, colors, and types of facture to overlap. Both works are tightly composed and saved from congestion by the clarity with which their parts are articulated. *The She-Wolf* and *Pasiphae*, both of 1943, attempt to bring together the density and intensity of *The Guardians of the Secret* and *Male and Female* and the openness and larger scale of *Stenographic Figure* and *The Moon Woman Cuts the Circle* by keeping the solid color grounds of the former and the compacted calligraphy of the latter, while dispensing with internal rectangles. In *The She-Wolf*, the shapes defined by Pollock's drawing, which enclose a central area of indistinct scumbling, shrink away from the edges of the canvas to allow the

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ground to register. The contrast of black and white calligraphy emphasizes those parts of the picture in which it is used and describes what one perceives as a single image isolated in the center of the canvas. *Pasiphae*, on the other hand, tends to do away with these distinctions, to spread its drawing evenly across the entire canvas surface, to distribute value contrast, and to allow its ground to show through relatively evenly throughout the composition. It is, indeed, perhaps Pollock's first successful all-over picture. The triumph of the synthetic tendency visible in *The She-Wolf* and *Pasiphae* came in the immense (about eight feet by twenty) *Mural* of 1943. Here, a continuous network of black, white, grayed green, and yellow dances across the length of the canvas, organized by the clarity of the strokes with which each color is applied and by the regular vertical accents of the black. Wholly fluid in format, the composition breathes through the alternation of light and dark values, modulated by grayed and softened hues, including a surprising pink. The remarkable relaxation achieved by Pollock in this huge canvas full of incident is emphasized by passages in which he has allowed thinly applied paint to drip and run, notably one at the lower left. It is a painting from which de Kooning must have learned a great deal, and one that seems to have freed Pollock for the next exploratory stage in his art, a stage that led to the mature drip pictures of 1948–50.

The years 1944–47 were devoted to various forms of experiment and to the consolidation of the style that was to bring Pollock first notoriety, then fame. Although clearly related to *Mural*, *Gothic* (1944) goes a step beyond its huge predecessor in suppressing any suggestion of progression in favor of all-overness. It does this by shortening and curving the lines of which its web is composed, lines that are thickened and carried out largely in black, grayed green, and blue. The recessive blue lines and the areas cradled within their overall web tend to read as a ground, allowing the picture to relax. As if fearful that it might relax too much, or be overwhelmed by the scale of its overall structure, Pollock has drawn an edge at several places on the fringes of the canvas to frame it. The sheer beauty of *Gothic*'s softened color was carried a step further in the yielding and lovely pinks and mixed grays of *Totem Lesson I*, which reverts to the imagery of *Birth*. Perhaps the most relaxed and ingratiating picture Pollock ever painted, *Totem Lesson I* is also firm and powerful, thanks to the broad black linear structure that controls it. Unlike *Birth*, its forms are separated from one another by passages of broadly applied color and fanciful calligraphy, and it stands apart from other pictures of its time, jumping ahead to ally itself with such future accomplishments as the late *Easter and the Totem*. More typical of the time are such pictures as *There Were Seven in Eight*, *Night Mist*, and *Night Ceremony*. Each of these compositions weaves an elaborate web or skein of black, white, or black and white that

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begins to suggest the drip pictures. The thickness of the lines in these webs is reduced and the rounded or geometrical shapes they define are smaller in scale than those of *Gothic* or *Totem Lesson I*. They tend, in fact, to reflect the gesture of a hand rather than the sweep of an arm, to be somewhat cautious and carefully contained within the canvas, the edges of which are again delimited from place to place by a painted frame. Certain of the shapes marked out by the webs are filled in to provide punctuation, and in *There Were Seven in Eight* this filling in—with lighter-valued hues—makes the web stand out against what appears to be a ground. None of these pictures, however, is entirely successful, partly because they are too muddy in color and indistinct in form. Increasingly, Pollock's art needed clarity and the appearance of simplicity, as he seems to have realized in *The Water Bull* and *The Blue Unconscious*. Both pictures are governed by patterns of discontinuous black lines applied in thinned-down paint. Areas of high-valued and modulated color play around and between these lines, resulting, in *The Water Bull*, in another picture reminiscent of Hofmann. Neither of these attempts at refinement and contrast wholly succeeds, in part because their linear patterns are too antic, but basically, one feels, because they were attempting something essentially antithetical to Pollock's sensibility.

By 1946, Pollock had developed the dense and elaborate pictorial skein to be seen in *Eyes in the Heat* and *Shimmering Substance*. Rough in appearance, these compositions are built up by an accumulation of small brushstrokes, their colors distributed evenly throughout the canvas, except for controlling patterns of black (in *Eyes in the Heat*) or yellow (in *Shimmering Substance*) that suggest not image but dominating pattern. This format devolved, during 1947, into the tentative early drip canvases *Sea Change*, *Alchemy*, and *Full Fathom Five*. Scale became smaller in each of these pictures, as if Pollock were unsure in dealing with his new format, or as if he were consciously attempting elegance. Visually dense, the pictures are cautious, almost delicate, in the elaboration of their skeins, and heavy in the dark richness of their colors, calling attention to themselves in an uncomfortable way. In *Cathedral* and *Enchanted Forest* of the same year, however, Pollock simplified his color structure and opened his skeins so that they were seen against the solid ground of the canvas, arriving at the mature drip pictures.

In the major drip compositions of 1948–50, Pollock found various ways of combating the impression of depth suggested by skeins seen against open grounds. He used a great deal of aluminum paint, and occasionally glossy black, which shone and clung to the surface. He elaborated his skeins so as to blot out the ground, something that resulted only in uncomfortable congestion unless there was sufficient variation of color or hue to alleviate the resulting density. Most successfully, he used colored grounds to bring

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what might otherwise be depth toward the canvas surface (*Number 13A: Arabesque*). Increasing his scale, he threw paint from cans with sticks or brushes, broadening the scope of his gesture beyond the movement of a hand or even an arm. Since he painted flat on the floor, he could attack his canvas from all sides or get into it physically to assure its breadth. In order to organize his pictures visually, Pollock resorted to thickening his dripped paint into areas (*Number 10, 1949*), filling in shapes created by the dripping (*Summertime*), mounting his canvas on board and cutting shapes out of it (*Out of the Web*), or, much less successfully, creating broad geometric patterns of straight black lines to underlie and contrast with the swirling web (*Number 13, 1949*). Inevitably, he turned his drips back from the edges of the canvas, which then declared themselves by the relative absence of paint. In at least one picture (*Summertime*), Pollock found these edges too barren and filled them in with a smaller, and largely unrelated, drip pattern. The result of this, as well as of Pollock's organizational devices, is that his drip compositions are considerably less all-over than they seemed at the time they were created—that, in fact, they can be read as large images rather than as implying fabrics of infinite extent. Coloristically, Pollock almost always dripped black and white onto his canvases and modulated between them with silver or other colors. The success of the drip pictures depends in part on the success of this modulation—on the degree of unity Pollock could bring out of his ambitious compositions while maintaining absolute clarity and definition. *Autumn Rhythm*, modulated with beige, and *One*, modulated with beige and blue-gray, maintain focus across vast surfaces. *Lavender Mist*, on the other hand, goes indistinct in places to its detriment, in part because paint applied in areas occasionally conflicts with paint applied as line, and it seems to want to become a field picture. Pollock's talent, however, was for drawing, and the accommodation of drawing to monumental abstract scale was what occupied him during the heroic two years of his drip pictures. No two of those pictures propose precisely the same pictorial solution.

Pollock's restlessness, his constant need to confront new problems rather than to consolidate solutions, drove him to abandon color altogether in the early 1950s, and the black and white pictures of 1950–52 reintroduce representation, largely in the form of heads and faces. At their best when the black is thickened out into fairly large areas and balanced evenly with the white of the canvas (*Number 14, 1951*; *Number 11, 1951*), they relieved Pollock of the necessity of concentrating on the complex relational structures within his compositions and allowed him to focus on expanding beyond the confines of the canvas. His non-representational black and white pictures ignored those confines by relaxing and opening out beyond them, while his representational pictures ignored them by concentrating on centered images. In 1952 this new scope was vig-

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orously confirmed in *Convergence* and *Blue Poles*, both of which reintroduce color—largely blue, red, and yellow. The underlying black linear structure of *Convergence* is thickened out so that the blotted color areas on top of it are congruent in scale and avoid the indistinctness of *Lavender Mist*. Indeed, those blotted areas seem to float free across the surface of the canvas in an openness new for Pollock. Where that openness might have led is suggested by *The Deep* and *Easter and the Totem*, both of 1953, which, each in a different way, develop toward broad color areas structuring large-scaled compositions by extreme value contrast. Both pictures represent a transformation of drawing for Pollock. In *Easter and the Totem* drawing becomes edge in a manner reminiscent of Still and Motherwell. In *The Deep* it floats on or is absorbed into one of two large value areas, each underlain by hues that subliminally enliven what appear to be the white and near black of the picture's two main areas. Whether Pollock would have pursued the paths suggested by these pictures is, of course, impossible to say. The broad, elegant, and relatively relaxed character they project is in many ways at odds with his impassioned freneticism. He seems to have thrived on struggle, and to have needed to affront the claims of European modernism with a cruder native sensibility. Out of that struggle came pictures which, if they were substantially different from the paintings that the United States was to produce during the triumphant sixties, were profoundly influential and of the highest quality.

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ROBERT ASAHINA

Plenty

BETTE DAVIS' BRUSQUE IMPERIOUSNESS, Tallulah Bankhead's self-parodying disdainfulness, Katharine Hepburn's genteel hauteur: there is something to be said for bitchiness. As an acting style, that is—which I am not entirely sure it is in the case of Kate Nelligan. For her recent stage and screen roles have been so similar, one suspects she has been typecast.

In the egregious *Eye of the Needle* two years ago, she played a self-pitying housewife who self-righteously betrays her crippled husband, then shoots her lover when he turns out to be a Nazi spy (the cad!). All along, we are supposed to adore her for being both vulnerable and abusive, the ideal S-and-M combination. This year, in *Without a Trace*, she plays another self-aggrandizing housewife, the mother of a young son who is kidnapped. Her loss and pain merely serve to bestow a blessing on her, a special dispensation to be nasty to anyone (everyone else in the film) who doesn't share her obsessive and unrealistic hope (restrospectively sanctioned by an unbelievable happy ending) of finding her boy alive.

This season also finds her starring, again smugly, as Susan Traherne, the long-suffering but never silent heroine of David Hare's *Plenty*. First produced in 1978 at the National Theater in London, where Nelligan originated the role, *Plenty* was brought by Joseph Papp to the Public Theatre downtown last fall, then to the Plymouth Theatre on Broadway this winter. To be sure, Hare has declared that it was not his intention that the part of Susan be played "stridently, even forbiddingly, so that the audience watches and is not engaged." No doubt he would also deny that Nelligan is bitchy, as an actress or a woman; after all, he dedicated the London production, which he directed (and presumably cast), to "Kate."

Yet Susan *is* a bitch; trust the play, not the playwright. And with grandiose unpleasantness, Nelligan *plays* her as a bitch: self-centered, self-serving, self-indulgent, self-dramatizing. (Some evidence of the match between actress and part was provided by Nelligan's demand for a higher salary—reportedly $2000 more per week than the $5000 in her contract—which Papp claimed caused the premature closing of *Plenty* in March, despite generally enthusiastic reviews and full houses.)

The cross that Susan bears, as she never ceases to remind us, is postwar Britain, a remarkably heavy load. *Plenty* starts with a short framing sequence, set in London in 1962, showing Susan deserting

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her husband, Raymond Brock (Edward Herrmann). The play proper takes place in ten of the eleven scenes that follow—vignettes with no pretense at transitions, beginning in occupied France in 1943. Susan, a mere lass of seventeen, is a Special Operations courier working with the Resistance. Frightened and alone, she is briefly comforted by another British operative, Codename Lazar (Ben Masters), who obligingly parachutes into her waiting arms, then just as conveniently disappears without ever revealing his true identity. Four years later, she is traveling with a married man (though "barely even his mistress") through postwar Belgium. When he suddenly dies of a heart attack, she needs the help of the British Embassy to dispose of the body (no muss, no fuss, we're English); thus she meets Raymond, then an eager young Third Secretary in Brussels.

In Scene Four, a few months later, she is back in England, working (and griping) in an import/export firm and conducting her own international affair with Raymond, who schedules regular Channel crossings to be with her. But it appears their romance will end along with the scene; seasickness has taken its toll on him, *Weltschmerz* on her. Four years later, Susan is making a rather bold proposal to a new gentleman friend, Mick (Daniel Gerroll): that he father her child without marrying her. Yet after eighteen months, with nothing to show for her trouble but another job she hates and an increasingly frustrated would-be sire, Susan undiplomatically puts an end to their fruitless liaison—with a gun.

By Scene Seven, however, Susan has settled down, at least to some extent. She has married Raymond, apparently not for love but out of gratitude for his help in cleaning up the mess that she made of her life three years before. It is now 1956, at the height of the Suez crisis, and their marriage and her mental health seem about as stable as the situation in the Middle East. Five years later, Raymond and Susan temporarily return to England from Iran, where he has been posted for three years, to attend the funeral of his former superior, Sir Leonard Darwin (George N. Martin), whose career had been ruined after he spoke out concerning Suez.

Six months pass, and Susan and Raymond are still in London; she has refused to go back to Iran, thus jeopardizing his career. Now she must plead on his behalf to Sir Andrew Charleson (Bill Moor), Chief Clerk of the Foreign Office; she even goes so far as to threaten suicide if her husband is not promoted. In Scene Ten, it is 1962 again, the evening before the day in Scene One. Raymond's tenure as a civil servant is over, though his supposedly self-sacrificing wife is still alive and very much kicking. He now works for an insurance company, and she is in a frenzy because they must sell their London house to make ends meet. (And I always thought the private sector was more lucrative than the public!) When she threatens to give it away instead, and begins throwing their belongings out the window, Raymond considers committing her; apparently

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her erratic behavior has become all too familiar and tiresome to him.

In the penultimate scene, a few months after leaving him, Susan has really hit the skids. But in a shabby hotel, she finds a moment of happiness with Lazar, who suddenly drops in on her after nineteen years. Then *Plenty* ends, none too soon, with a brief coda. It is 1944; France has just been liberated. In a spasm of peacetime optimism, the young Susan anticipates the coming years in the last line of the play: "There will be days and days and days like this." It is, of course, a hope destined to be unfulfilled, a prediction belied by history, or so Hare would have us believe, and certainly by everything that happened "before" that scene—the events occurring later in time but earlier in the sequence of the play.

It is an artificial sequence that obscures, even subverts, rather than illuminates Hare's point, which I take to be the broken promise of postwar "peace and plenty" (in the words of one of the characters). That point must be dramatized, however, not merely asserted, and it must be dramatized by showing how Susan's bitchy disappointment in her country results not merely from personal but from social failings. She must be shown to be in some sense a victim, not just of herself but of circumstances, of society or history.

And this Hare does not do. It seems to have escaped his notice that *any* impressionable teenager thrown into an extreme situation is likely to romanticize it later; the relevant question is how many are thereby incapacitated as adults. Think of the generation (mine) that came of age during what has come to be known as the sixties, the years (not really a decade) of "sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll," not to mention the civil rights movement, the space race, the Great Society, Vietnam, and the antiwar movement. Most members of my cohort of "baby boomers" have come to realize that the exhilaration of undergoing adolescence in a period of rapid social change is not a proper index of the quality of adult life in general. Though many of them still romanticize that heady period, most did not fall to pieces when it ended. Nor did most survivors of World War Two subsequently slip into madness by way of drink, drugs, casual sex, and self-hatred—as Susan does in *Plenty*.

So what makes her exceptional? Nothing, as far as I can see, but her loony idealization of her underground adventures and her inability to adjust to postwar society, which reveal less about the war, and the peace that followed, than about her tortured psyche. About halfway through *Plenty*, impatient both with the coy structure and with the all-too-visible and audible evidence of Susan's decline, I talked myself into anticipating the final scene as the key to her behavior, just as I would the arbitrarily concealed solution to a mechanically constructed mystery—all the while keeping in mind Edmund Wilson's complaint about unpacking "large crates by swallowing the excelsior only to find at the bottom a few bent and

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rusty nails." Surely, I told myself, Hare is only showing us Susan's unpleasant foolishness in order to undercut them with a final stroke, revealing that he knows better than she does.

Imagine my surprise when I got to the bottom of *Plenty* and found no nails at all, not even bent and rusty ones—no epiphany, not on the part of Susan or her creator. No realization that the (understandable) expectation of "days and days and days like this" eventually resulted in disappointment for many, but in madness for only a few, whose experiences could thus hardly be regarded as representative.

In this regard, Hare is very much at war with himself, though unconsciously. As a member of the young generation of British playwrights who grew out of the so-called Fringe movement of the late sixties, Hare and his contemporaries—Caryl Churchill, David Edgar, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, and others—have openly rejected the privatized, psychologistic drama of their predecessors, particularly John Osborne. (They have in mind, I think, something like the Marcusean critique of "repressive tolerance"; they see capitalist society as isolating individuals, and art under capitalism as being an opiate for the intellectuals.) Yet *Plenty* resembles nothing so much as *Look Back in Anger*, though far inferior to it: plenty of ranting and raving by bitter people in the throes of domestic strife.

And Susan's bitterness is directed toward such predictable and easy targets that, once again, I thought Hare would undercut her later. (He does not.) After working at the hated import/export firm, for instance, she tells Mick: "I'm thinking of going into advertising. . . . I doubt if it'll stretch me, but it would be a way of having some fun." Later, she does get a job writing copy, but then she complains to her friend Alice (Ellen Parker): "This is hell. . . . In France I told such glittering lies. But where's the fun in lying for a living? . . . What is the point? Why do I exist?" So why did she take the job in the first place? Just so she could then disparage it, and herself? And if lying as a spy is not *literally* "lying for a living," then what is? It could be that Hare meant these lines to be ironic, but Nelligan certainly does not shade them with irony; instead, she imperiously invites us to share her scorn. (But just how hard is it to knock advertising?)

She likewise invites our approval of Susan's espousal of a dubious and anachronistic feminism, which (typically) consists mostly of self-congratulation: "We will spend the next twenty years of our life pretending to be thick," she tells Alice in 1952. " 'I'm sorry, Miss Traherne, we'd like to employ you, but unfortunately you are not stupid enough.' " Ten years later, after leeching off Raymond and draining his store of generosity and good will, she whines, "I do think to be merely your husband's wife is demeaning for a woman of any integrity at all." No doubt it is, but that pronouncement comes as the preface to her plea on behalf of her husband to Sir

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Andrew: having it both ways, I believe that is called. Once more I expected some awareness of the character's hypocrisy on the part of the playwright or the actress; once more I was disappointed.

In his notes to the published version of *Plenty*, Hare has written that it is "important that a balance of sympathy is maintained throughout the evening, and that the actress playing Susan puts the case for her as strongly as she can. The case against her makes itself, or is made by the other characters." It is true that Raymond scores some telling points. Up to his neck in her crap, just before their final breakup, he at last puts her in her place: "Which is the braver? To live as I do? Or never, ever to face life like you? . . . Your life is selfish, self-interested gain. That's the most charitable interpretation to hand. You claim to be protecting some personal ideal, always at a cost of almost infinite pain to everyone around you. You are selfish, brutal, unkind. Jealous of other people's happiness as well, determined to destroy other ways of happiness they find. I've spent fifteen years of my life trying to help you, simply trying to be kind, and my great comfort has been that I am waiting for some indication from you . . . some sign that you have valued this kindness of mine."

It will be a long wait, unfortunately, made longer by Hare's refusal to acknowledge the justice of Raymond's remarks—too little, too late; not exactly equal time for him after nine acts of *her* side of the argument. Throughout, Raymond's kindness is not dramatized, only mentioned secondhand, often by Susan, who is hardly an impartial witness. After she shot Mick, for example, Raymond came to her rescue by giving him "money in notes," as Susan says disparagingly. "He slapped them like hot poultices all over his wounds." It was only then, she admits, ten years after the fact, that "I felt I had to get engaged." But earlier, at the disastrous dinner party she gave during the Suez crisis, she had announced to all present that she married Raymond in "a moment of weakness . . . because he reminded me of my father. At that point of course I didn't realize just what a shit my father was." Hare has a pretty funny idea of balance.

His strategy, if a conscious one, hardly seems to fit his notion that "ambiguity is central to the idea of the play." Susan's behavior is unambiguously atrocious throughout. Mick complains to her with some justification: "It feels very bad to be used. . . . You come out feeling dirty." Susan's response? A breathtaking *non sequitur*: "You think I enjoy slumming around? Then why have I not looked for another father?" In other words, their arrangement was perfectly okay because she did not enjoy it and furthermore limited her machinations to only one hapless victim.

As written and as performed, Susan is such a neurotic bitch that she overwhelms the rest of the characters and undermines the broader social theme of the play (especially since the ending simply

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justifies rather than explains her behavior). I wondered at first how Hare could fail to realize how much his character is at odds with his intentions. Then it occurred to me that he might simply be the victim of his own writing. It must be fun to create a character who can get away with all sorts of vicious behavior in polite society. (Surely it is often amusing to watch, as the continuing popularity of the Davis-Bankhead-Hepburn style indicates.) And there can be no doubt about Susan's ability to stick her dagger in, give it a twist, and walk away virtually scot-free.

Yet the character who really comes closest to embodying Hare's idea of the deterioration of the dream of plenty is not Susan but Raymond. It is he who began by trying to live that dream in his ordinary life as a diplomat. It is he who compromises it, though with full understanding and irony, during Suez. It is in the ruin of his career that the decay of the promise is most evident—not in the ashes of the fantasy life of a woman who participated in the fate of Empire mostly as a spectator. (Even in France Susan was just a courier.) After all, it is Raymond who confidently predicts in 1947: "I think everyone's going to be rich very soon. Once we've got over the effects of the war. It's going to be coming out of everyone's ears." And it is he who finds that "money sticks to my fingers," only to proclaim, following fifteen years of affluence: "Too much money. I think that's what went wrong. Something about it corrupts the will to live." (He must be talking about Susan's will, not his.)

Throughout *Plenty*, it is Raymond, not Susan, who is the ironic, tragic, representative figure. Through his eyes we can understand the Suez crisis for what it was. Susan thinks it is little more than "an exciting week" in which "everything is up for grabs," proving that the English "don't even have the guts to make a war any more." But Raymond realizes that Britain not only could not but *would not* "make a war"—that "mostly what we do is what we think people expect of us. Mostly it's wrong." "As our influence wanes," Sir Andrew says, "as our empire collapses, there is little to believe in. Behavior is all." Of course it is easy enough to mock the hypocrisies of diplomacy, and Susan misses no opportunity to do just that. She even cannot resist needling Sir Andrew while she is pleading with him: "Do you never find it in yourself," she asks, "to despise a profession in which nobody may speak their mind?" "That is the nature of the service," he replies sensibly.

But for dramatic purposes, sensibleness—along with decency, decorum, tolerance, patience, humility: those liberal virtues that can seem like failings in moments of crisis—is likely to suffer in comparison to sensibility. To Hare, Susan's emotional sensitivity, even when preposterously keen and even when it entails insensitivity to other people, is dramatically preferable to Raymond's somewhat dull civility. And in truth, it would be hard to urge a playwright to prefer the opposite: the perspective of a top dog instead of an underdog

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whose inferior status liberates her from the constraints of civility, frees her to be outrageous, and thus interesting. A bitch is, of course, a female dog, and human females, inferiors in a male-dominated society, can express their outrage and alienation in the nasty behavior known as bitchiness, a mode of expression not open to men (except perhaps gay men). And bitchiness certainly makes for better drama than . . . niceness.

Still, if Hare was smart enough to create the character of Raymond, he should be smart enough to see that the bitchiness of Susan and of Nelligan has undermined the premise of his play. (Of course, love may be blind for a playwright who dedicates his work to his leading lady.) But if he thought about it, he might also realize there is also something peculiar about his premise.

At one point in the penultimate scene, Susan, despairing, announces in her usual grandiose fashion: "There's only one kind of dignity, that's in living alone." Moments later, she says, "I have to believe that there's someone, you see, somebody else who's been living like me." She is addressing Lazar, and with these words she comes as close as she will ever come to comprehending the hollowness of her life, a life dedicated to a long-lost ideal. What she doesn't see, nor does Hare, is that the ideal itself is pretty hollow.

What was so wonderful about those war years, anyway? "Those of us who went through this kind of war, I think we do have something in common," proclaims Susan. "It's a kind of impatience, we're rather intolerant, we don't suffer fools. . . . If you haven't suffered . . . well." Raymond, sensible as always, counters: "You don't think you wear your suffering a little heavily? This smart club of people you belong to who had a very bad war. . . ." (Later, he even tells Susan: "I know you better than you think. I recognize the signs. When you talk longingly about the war . . . some deception usually follows.") He fails to point out, though, how strange it is that Susan should regard her alienation from her countrymen as arising from her wartime experience. I always thought that Englishmen who were nostalgic about the war cherished most the feeling of solidarity, the belief that, in the darkest hours, when Britain stood alone against Hitler, they could count on one another.

I suspect that Hare, in grounding Susan's disenchantment from postwar England in her "very bad war," is actually projecting his own contemporary alienation onto the past. It would be hard for him to deny British heroism during World War Two. What he can do is taint it—by making it the source of postwar weakness instead of strength.

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Reviews

WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Classic Revival

SELDOM HAS ANY LITERARY-PUBLISHING EVENT struck more people as a splendid idea and received more unequivocal praise than *The Library of America.*[1] John Russell spoke for most, so it seemed, when he announced in a warm-up notice of the series, that "a great wrong will be set right," the "wrong" of course being the absence, in relatively inexpensive editions, of the collected works of America's foremost authors, our classic writers. As we have heard perhaps too often by now, the idea for the project was first expressed by Edmund Wilson who voiced his hopes for an American version of the French Pléiade editions of great writers (and not just French ones; Dostoyevsky, Dante, Shakespeare, Hemingway are available in Pléiade texts). But somehow the funds Wilson thought were to go to back "his" Pléiade got diverted, he charged, into elaborate scholarly editions published under the sponsorship of the Modern Language Association and edited within an inch of their lives by textual scholars. The results—as with Howells' *Their Wedding Journey* or Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*, the latter of which Wilson weighed and pronounced to weigh nine pounds—provided him with materials to make fun of in his essay "The Fruits of the MLA." (The MLA counterattacked, but I think Wilson won the battle.) But while the large scholarly MLA editions continued to creep, at a snail's pace, toward publication, the Library of America has burst on the scene,

[1] HERMAN MELVILLE, VOLUME I: Typee, Omoo, Mardi, ed. by *G. Thomas Tanselle.* $25.00. HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, THREE NOVELS: Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Minister's Wooing, Oldtown Folks, ed. by *Kathryn Kish Sklar.* $25.00. WALT WHITMAN: Poetry and Prose, ed. by *Justin Kaplan.* $25.00. NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE, VOLUME I: Tales and Sketches, ed. by *Roy Harvey Pearce.* $25.00. MARK TWAIN, VOLUME I. MISSISSIPPI WRITINGS: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Life on the Mississippi, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson, ed. by *Guy Cardwell.* $25.00. WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS, VOLUME I. NOVELS 1875–1886: A Foregone Conclusion, A Modern Instance, Indian Summer, The Rise of Silas Lapham, ed. by *Edwin H. Cady.* $25.00. JACK LONDON, VOLUME I. NOVELS AND STORIES: The Call of the Wild, White Fang, The Sea-Wolf, Klondike and Other Stories, ed. by *Donald Pizer.* $25.00. JACK LONDON, VOLUME II. NOVELS AND SOCIAL WRITINGS: The People of the Abyss, The Road, The Iron Heel, Martin Eden, John Barleycorn, Essays, ed. by *Donald Pizer.* $25.00. The Library of America. Distributed by Viking Press.

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indeed employing some of those MLA scholars like G. Thomas Tanselle or Edwin H. Cady to give us what will eventually be, so the publicity sheet says, "the collected, in some cases the complete works of our leading writers from the beginning to the present century." No small pleasure to look forward to.

Further facts about the nature of these books: each one has an editor who gives us an "authoritative" version of the text and a note on how that text or texts were chosen. Each contains a chronology of the author's life and what the publicity handout calls "necessary notes for the general reader." These latter have been kept to a minimum, indeed the notes to the Harriet Beecher Stowe volume only amount to a page and a half or so. A questionable decision is the Library's omission of introductions to the individual volumes, which decision Daniel Aaron, president of the project, justified on the grounds that an introduction wastes space and quickly dates; since the books are to remain permanently in print—so runs the expectation—the time-bound introduction will be omitted. Perhaps this makes sense, yet in addition to Thomas Tanselle's discussion of Melville's texts, would not the General Reader be pleased to have had a few pages of introductory comment devoted to the three early novels of Melville combined together here? Or in the case of Howells, an explanation of why the four novels selected for publication in a volume make a sensible and interesting combination?

At any rate, as the executive director, Cheryl Hurley, insisted in the publicity release of a year ago, "Quality is everything" (the release concluded its pitch by bringing in some very high quality indeed—*JFK supported the idea*, we are boldly told). The most "quality" aspect of the whole enterprise (aside from its Board of Advisors, who are so distinguished I won't mention their names here) is the physical get-up of the books, described at length in another release, in truly mouth-watering prose. The books are "compact," with "ample margins" and readable pages, but the General Reader may not immediately see "why these books are such a pleasure to hold and to open," nor know that "the deep and lustrous color results from dying the binding cloth in the thread, before it is woven, rather than after, or that the unusual lightness and flexibility of the binding boards give these books their comfortable feel." Once opened the book stays opened, because its "opaque, acid-free paper is bound with the grain." The Galliard typeface, designed by an English designer, is such that though each page holds a lot of type (465 words or so by my rough count) it does not look "pinched or busy." The "ink coverage" does not show through, so it is asserted, though I'm afraid I can't agree with that claim across the board. Finally, "A special computerized kerning program was set up to make sure that the spacing between the opening capital letter of each chapter and the letter following it is the most harmonious possible." (Kerning is the process by which individual letters are fitted together in the interests of more readability.) After finishing the account of these

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books' design and manufacture, I felt something comparable to the yearnings stimulated by Mimi Sheraton's account of eating in a good restaurant.

To my knowledge, only one American reader—not a General one to be sure—has explicitly declined to be impressed by the whole business. This was Hugh Kenner, who in an article for *Harpers* titled "Classics by the Pound" mocked the heaviness of the enterprise (he was not, for once, referring to *il miglior fabbro*). Taking the tip from Edmund Wilson, Kenner dragged out his kitchen scales, so he swears, weighed the Melville volume and found it tipped to thirty-one ounces, as opposed to his dandy little Pléiade Flaubert, which weighed in at only twelve. And Kenner had other complaints about the *Library*: these American volumes were much thicker than the Pléiade texts, so you couldn't fit one of them into a jacket pocket and take it along on a weekend in the country, as he assured us the French do with theirs. This was because the block of "acid-free woodpulp" in which Melville was presented to us, uses up "sixty-seven cubic inches of space, as against [in the Pléiade] Flaubert's mere twenty-four." Warming to the task of complaint, Kenner next ran a play directly at the *Library*'s strength by assailing its design. For all their concern with providing an excellent typeface, the designers had neglected the "gutter" of the book, the "central valley where facing pages meet." For Kenner's taste, those margins were too narrow, since you had to force the book open flat if you weren't to lose parts of words in the gutter. He concluded his litany of dissatisfactions by announcing, presumably from personal experience, that if rain falls onto the lovely Dutch-dyed rayon binding of a *Library* book (actually it *is* lovely), the binding will stain, whereas if the Pléiade gets rained on you just brush off the drops. As often in Kenner's world, they order things better over there.

Kenner devoted so much time to the physical aspect of the books, because, slyly, he was out to denigrate their spiritual, ideal type as well. So he caricatured the *Library*'s undertaking as smelling of the undertaker, nay the gravedigger. Melville's text had been "entombed," and the whole list of American authors to come (James, Emerson, Twain, Poe, Henry Adams etc.) was "officially American literature: something safely embalmed and . . . long since defined at Harvard." For Kenner on the other hand—and this is at the root of his dissatisfaction with the enterprise—American literature only became significant, "an indisputable entity," when with James and Eliot and Pound it became international. So much then for the *Library*'s efforts over Hawthorne and Melville, Twain and William Dean Howells. These "safe" books, written before the awakening to internationalism, would not inspire passionate argument about whether they should be included in the *Library*—as would contemporary authors. Just to bait us, Kenner offers Ross MacDonald as a possible candidate for inclusion, rather than "Mrs. Stowe" who "soars aloft into the Disneyfied sunsets of Literature" (it was proba-

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bly the volume of Stowe's novels which Kenner left out in the rain). Finally he beats the drums yet once more for exciting combinations of names like Oppen-Zukofsky-Reznikoff, or Olson-Creeley, or (yes!) Michael McClure. No chance of *them* ever getting into—in the concluding words of his notice—this "Grant's Tomb" of our literature.

I spend so much time on Kenner's response because it is much more interesting in its excesses than the pious praise thus far given the *Library* (including a long account in the *New Republic* by R. W. B. Lewis, who it turns out is on the Board of Advisors for the enterprise), and also because it patronizes our classic literature in a way I might accuse myself of doing, at least of having done. In graduate school at Harvard, three decades ago can it be, we read our Dr. Johnson or Pope or Keats with full attention if not reverence, while nineteenth-century American writers before James were awarded less respect (I speak for myself here, but I think not only for myself). I remember struggling through Melville's *White Jacket* with the growing sense that this was not *literature* but some sort of guide to life on an American man-of-war in 1846, and that I wanted very little part of it. There was an all-or-nothing character to my uncertain aspirations as a student of literature, and those American Classics, that stuff back there before James rescued it into elegance and complication, were a problem even though they included *Moby Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter* (how "good" was that, really?) and *Walden* and great sentences from Emerson. The sense on my part, crude and arrogant surely, was that you could start taking our literature seriously say around the time of *Portrait of a Lady*, whereas eighteenth-century English poetry was securely in place and thus worthy of study. Then there were the American Studies people, and perhaps that was part of "our" sniffy holding back from serious engagement with nineteenth-century American literary works. In my case it meant avoiding, to name some works by authors already published by the *Library*, Melville's Polynesian novels (I had always avoided Adventure Stories anyway), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (unlike *Bleak House* or *Middlemarch*), most of Whitman (D. H. Lawrence helped me to look down on "Walt"), not to mention Jack London, who wrote about dogs, didn't he?

One thing led to another, led to my never teaching nineteenth-century American writers even when I had the chance, the official excuse being that I didn't know enough—a true but inadequate response. So the *Library*'s appearance meant a chance for me to see how much I had sold short (or just plain not read) those books which were said to be my heritage. The result of the experiment—not yet concluded, this is a partial report—has been mixed, and the remainder of this "review" is no more than a report on what one General Reader found when he encountered, in a fairly unsystematic way, some American classic writers. The best place to encounter them, I decided, was under the apple tree in my back yard, where I

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spent a good many hours last spring and summer, alternating Hawthorne stories (usually taken four or so at a sitting) with Melville's *Typee* (a few chapters at a time) with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, read finally and for the first time about thirty-five years after I should have read it. Whitman I saved for the evenings, thumbing through Justin Kaplan's edition—with both the first and final editions of *Leaves of Grass*—in a random way.

I had always preferred Hawthorne's stories to his novels, and I managed to get about 500 pages into the *Library*'s volume of the stories, arranged in the order of their first published appearance. (The volume also contains *The Wonder Book*, which I haven't reached.) My sketchy notes show that "Sights of a Steeple" brought to mind Updike's "Lifeguard"; that "Wives of the Dead" is a "fine" piece of work; that "Roger Malvin's Burial" has some "impressive psychology" and that "The Gentle Boy" is also interesting for its "sympathetic psychology"; that "Mr. Higginbottom's Catastrophe" is inventive about tale-telling; that there is good local stuff about fish and Nahant Beach in something called "The Village Uncle"; that "Little Annie's Ramble" illustrates Hawthorne's "saccharine manner at its worst"; that "Vision of the Fountain" is "awful"; and so forth. The Hawthorne I found most appealing, and the one I took most seriously, was a master of the picturesque rather than seer into the human heart. A charming, and often a dull, writer, modernist claims for whom (Richard Poirier has made them) I was unable to credit. Melville I expected big trouble with, since the Polynesian tales were calculated to daunt a readerly evader of things anthropological like myself. But *Typee* could be admired, pages on end, for the ease and limberness of its relatively plain style. *Omoo* was all right too, though not as rich as D. H. Lawrence said it was, and halfway through I'd had enough. And as in the past, I was utterly unable to keep turning the pages of the turgid, silly, grotesquely written *Mardi*, surely the worst "novel" by any of our classic writers:

> "How the isles grow and multiply around us!" cried Babbalanja, as turning the bold promontory of an uninhabited shore, many distant lands bluely loomed into view. "Surely, our brief voyage, may not embrace all Mardi like its reef?"
>
> "No," said Media, "Much must be left unseen. Nor every where can Yillah be sought, noble Taji."
>
> Said Yoomy, "We are as birds, with pinions clipped, that in unfathomable and endless woods, but flit from twig to twig of one poor tree."

So it goes in chapter 137, "Where Babbalanja and Yoomy embrace," and if you think that "context" makes things any better you are welcome to think so. About Melville's art I ended up feeling the way I have always felt—ambivalent. A feeling I gather not unknown to the author of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*.

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With Whitman I fortified myself by rereading Randall Jarell's fine essay in appreciation, which always has the effect of convincing me that, yes, Whitman is a great poet and that all the things to be said against him are but the bleatings of small and timid readers—"baby critics who have barely learned to complain about the lack of ambiguity in *Peter Rabbit*," as Jarrell put it. But then I pick up *Leaves of Grass* and the complaints which rise to my own lips—how *can* he say this? why *must* he say that, in those words?—cease to feel insignificant. I realize once more that reading Whitman is a riskier activity than reading most poets, in that you have to put yourself on the line, line by line, and not just put on it your largeness of soul—which can appreciate the splendor of "I am the man, I suffered, I was there" (Jarrell's touchstone, and Lionel Trilling's after him)—but your delicacy of ear. There really is a difference between a passage that sounds like poetry and one that sounds like rant, but it is hard to articulate the difference, and without eternal vigilance you may well miss it. D. H. Lawrence said it once and for all time: "A certain ghoulish insistency. A certain horrible pottage of human parts. A certain stridency and portentousness. A luridness about his beatitudes." Lawrence knew, perhaps by listening to his own voice as well as Whitman's, whereof he spoke.

The best book I read last summer was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, enthusiastically recommended to me years ago by a visitor to these shores named Anthony Burgess, but only confronted now. It was nothing like the comic book *Uncle Tom* I had carried around in my head, all Simon Legree beating Negroes and little Eva pursued over the breaking ice, as in *Alexander Nevsky*. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel turned out instead to be a much more varied collection of narratives than I had dreamed. Particularly the presentation of Augustine St. Clare, in the wonderful central section of the book with its treatment of the relations between St. Clare and his wife and child and with Miss Ophelia and Topsy, seemed to me brilliant, nothing at all like the "eleven-Kleenex tract" Kenner scornfully refers to. There was abundant comedy and satire in the book; there was also revealed, to this latecomer of a Stowe-reader, an enlightening and imaginative exposition of various attitudes toward slavery, subtly distinguished and put into dramatic relationships before one's eyes. It is a book I shall read again, something I will never do to, say *Mardi* (did I read it once?) or *The Marble Faun*, to mention another preposterous "classic" which will be coming along later in this series. The other Stowe novels in the volume I barely began, but *Oldtown Folks* looked readable and interesting in its recording of provincial manners and matters of belief.

Of the second batch of *Library* volumes (Twain, Howells, Jack London twice) I've begun London's *The Sea Wolf* and plan to finish it. As for *White Fang* and *The Call of the Wild* I should have read them as a teenager and found out about dogs, instead of taking out James Farrell and Thomas Wolfe so as to find out (I thought) about sex. But Twain was a pleasure this time. Reading the first half of *Life on the Mississippi* followed by *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and

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Huckleberry Finn brought me closer to a writer I'd always resisted slightly, though of course approved of. After hearing Kenner's insistence that American writing came of age only when it became international, one should pick up these books of Twain to experience the "coming of age" of American prose style. Reading him in the morning, at the beginning of the day when one feels most alive as a reader, can be an experience of intense pleasure in its sharp and satisfactory outlining of things, of "sheer presentation" such as Pound was to call for. And there are things in *Huck Finn* which prompted me to sympathize for the first time with what Howells was getting at when he said, at the end of *My Mark Twain*, that "It is in vain that I try to give a notion of the intensity with which he pierced to the heart of life, and the breadth of vision with which he compassed the whole world, and tried for the reason of things, and then left trying." "The Lincoln of our literature," Howells called him, and it is more than fancy rhetoric.

Finally there is Howells himself, our most underrated classic, and the one of all these writers who gives me most sustained pleasure, a confession the making of which probably debars me from being taken as a responsible discriminator among American fictions, or perhaps fiction generally. In defense I ask only that disbelievers in Howells take time to read, one after the other, *A Modern Instance*, *Indian Summer*, and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, just to see whether in this humane satirist, this wise and gentle man, we do not have a very gem of an American realist who can stand comparison with the Trollope whom Howells disliked when he met him. Although Mark Twain was a good deal less than a discriminating critic of novels, especially where his friend was concerned, and although (as Kenneth Lynn points out in his biography of Howells) Twain could not bear such favorite novels of his friend as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Middlemarch* or *The Bostonians*, still he said the essential thing to say about Howells' art. Here, in a letter, Twain expresses his delight in having come across, in an issue of *Harpers* in 1885, the second section of Howells' *Indian Summer*:

> It is a beautiful story, & makes a body laugh all the time, & cry inside, & feel so old & so forlorn; & gives him gracious glimpses of his lost youth that fill him with a measureless regret, & build up in him a cloudy sense of his having been a prince, once, in some enchanted far-off land, & of being in exile now, & desolate—& lord, no chance to ever get back there again! That is the thing that hurts. Well, you have done it with marvelous facility—

So Howells did it in *Indian Summer*, and so he does elsewhere. His appearance in the early volumes of the *Library of America* is a particularly welcome one.

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DEAN FLOWER

Fiction Chronicle

ANN BEATTIE'S STORIES exert a continuing, almost morbid fascination. What seemed funny and satiric in her first collection, *Distortions*, has disappeared on longer acquaintance: she wasn't kidding. The distortions are us, Beattie tells her readers, over and over again. Lest that meaning be evaded by the affluent and educated audience she appeals to, Beattie has made her characters all pretty much the same sort that Updike and Cheever used to chronicle, bringing them up to date. Now, with her third collection of stories published (and a good portion of her next in recent *New Yorkers*), Beattie seems unable to break the mold.[1] Her titles hint at this: *Secrets and Surprises*, her second collection, suggested an effort to charm and entice, and so in her present collection do stories labeled "Sunshine and Shadow," "Desire," "Afloat" and "Happy"; but other titles tell us the truth. These are stories of loss and emotional dearth, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, about people so stuck in failing relationships that they're *Falling in Place*. The dust jacket assures us that Beattie's stories " 'aim for grace,' and invariably achieve it," but when we turn to the story from which the phrase was hopefully plucked ("Learning to Fall"), we learn that each character is locked in disappointments and failures, that fall they must, and that the only choice is whether to do so gracefully or to take another bruising. Reasonably, the narrator opts for the former.

The word *grace* has no religious reverberations, in Beattie's realm, nor is that what she seems to be after stylistically; deliberate gracelessness might be a better description, or scrupulous undernourishment. She remains a severe stylist, allowing few metaphors, lulling rhythms, or rich sense appeals, and no verbal play. Beckett's prose has been thought an influence; I am more often reminded of Harold Pinter. The following passage from the first page of "Winter: 1978" may be an unconscious Pinter-parody or a self-parody, but it's typical of the almost perverse way Beattie launches her stories:

> Benton and Olivia had just arrived in L.A. Nick had gone to the airport to meet them. Olivia said she wasn't feeling well and insisted on getting a cab to the hotel, even though Nick offered to drive her and meet Benton at Allen Tompkins's house later.

[1] THE BURNING HOUSE, by *Ann Beattie*. Random House. $12.95.

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Four characters have been mentioned so far, but note the refusal to focus anything with a perceiver's emotions or a narrator's explanations. The passage continues:

> The man who had also come to the airport to meet Benton was Tompkins's driver. Nick could never remember the man's name. Benton was in L.A. to show his paintings to Tompkins. Tompkins would buy everything he had brought. Benton was wary of Tompkins, and of his driver, so he had asked Nick to meet him at the airport and to go with him.

One hardly knows whether to laugh or draw a diagram. It reads like a story problem in Algebra 1, a puzzle with a catch to it (How many were going to Tompkins's house?), nearly a farce. Yet such enigmatic openings are fundamental to Beattie's story-telling. We are *never* reassured about which character, if any, will be central, or who is related to whom (married? separated? divorced? living together? *formerly* living together? divorced but not fully separated? and so on), or what the narrator's gender is, or how old people are, or whether Hugo is a person's name or a dog's. Apparent lapses or sheer perversities in exposition, however, dramatize Beattie's theme—the uncertainty (to put it broadly) of all marital and familial relationships these days. Ruth behaves as if she's the mother but isn't; Lynn doesn't know what footing she and Martin are on; Amanda gives Tom the key to the house and he drops in at the oddest hours but they're divorced. Stories that begin in bizarre tangles of ambiguous relationships end not with explanations or solutions but usually with clarified enigmas. "Cinderella Waltz," for example, turns out to be almost precise. It is not about the wife's shocked discovery that her husband (Milo) left her for a man (Bradley) or that Milo is now dumping Bradley and his nine-year-old daughter for a new life on the West Coast. It proves rather to be about the peculiar relationship that now exists between the wife and Bradley, less sympathy than identification. "I don't know who his friends are [she thinks], how old he is, where he grew up, whether he believes in God, or what he usually drinks. I'm shocked that I know so little, and I reach out and touch him." Neither the enemy she first imagined him nor anyone she can love, he's a perfect stranger who seems closer than lover, child, or husband. "Running Dreams" involves a more typical Beattie quartet, the unhappily-married Barnes and Audrey, their weekend visitors Martin (Audrey's brother, Barnes's "best friend") and Lynn (Martin's lover until six months ago), but keep in mind that such categorizing is just what the story seeks to overturn. Each person has an apparently successful identity that proves insecure when bad dreams, echoes of the past, make them twitch and shudder like Bruno, the dog sleeping on the rug. For Audrey, it's two miscarriages; for Barnes, a cruel

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father; for Martin, his long-standing envy of Barnes; and for Lynn, the sorrow of her father's death when she was five. Unfortunately, quick summary does little justice to Beattie's fine-edged particularity. Her characterizing strokes are so swift and direct: "We trample ferns I'd avoid if I were walking alone," thinks Lynn. And the mood never seems to require more than a short sentence: "We are silent, and I can hear the house moving in the wind."

Despite all the oddity and particularity, Beattie's stories suffer from sameness. Sixteen in a row is too much. What the poor sensitive gentleman was to Henry James, the angst-ridden catatonic woman is to Ann Beattie. Ruth in "Learning to Fall" goes on other people's errands in spasms of impure self-abnegation; Amy in "The Burning House" hovers in her kitchen like a mere eavesdropper to all the voices addressing her. The remarried wife in "Afloat" finds her gestures so fruitless she wishes "simply to get off the earth." The woman in "Waiting," whose friends cannot console her while her husband is away, imagines the dog has died. Looked at one way, these women—and most of the men too—are all powerless to change. Looked at another, their stasis is not so bad. If marriage and the family have cracked apart and the metaphoric house is in flames, why isn't all changed utterly? An early Beattie story says why: "Nothing ever came entirely apart." For all the lamentation over failing relationships and disintegrating families, Beattie keeps showing where the rifts stop. Memories which so often torment still connect us, sometimes savingly, with the past. Children who seem the victims of broken marriages have a way of insisting on the irrevocability of the old roles, no matter what the new arrangements are. A touching, nearly comic instance of this is in "Desire," where a man named B. B. cares for his ten-year-old Bryce during spring vacation. While his new wife has a bubble-bath upstairs, father and son sit together at the kitchen table:

> B. B. frowned. He had a drink in his hand. He pushed the ice cube to the bottom and they both watched it bob up. Bryce leaned over and reached into the drink and gave it a push, too.
>
> "No licking that finger," B. B. said.

Whatever the sorrow and confusion, some things—like being a parent—do not change. Things fall apart, Beattie shows us, but only so much.

Bobbie Ann Mason, by contrast, is a breath of fresh air. She grew up on a farm in western Kentucky and has chosen to make it—the Paducah-Kentucky Lake region—her fictional locale. Educational travels took Mason as far as the University of Connecticut, a Ph.D., and an excellent book on Nabokov. But none of that intrudes in her first collection of stories, which are all somewhat rambling, funny, full of twangy dialogue and excruciatingly ordinary mid-Ameri-

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can folkways.[2] Mason has an excellent ear and an avid collector's eye for vulgarity and stereotype. She has undoubtedly learned something of this from Flannery O'Connor, but Mason's tone is more affectionate than critical, more humorous than satiric:

> C. W. and Betty have just returned from Florida and they are full of news about Sea World. Betty shows Waldeen her new tote bag with a killer whale pictured on it.
> "Guess who we saw at the Louisville airport," Betty says.
> "I give up," says Waldeen.
> "Colonel Sanders!"

Mason has to perfection the short story writer's needful compression: "Once, when an earthquake was predicted . . . , Dusty went on an impromptu vacation with her children. They went to a dude ranch in Arizona, and Dusty took her new set of Teflon II pans with her." Even one-sentence vignettes have unexpected depths, under their brisk irony. Here is a teen-ager dragged along on a picnic: "Holly sits under a tree, her back to the gravestones, and opens a Vicki Barr flight stewardess novel." Mason keeps her narrative voice carefully subordinate to the voices of her characters. They seem to tell their own stories. "Here, Mama, that's you," says a girl, pointing to the picture of a Charlie's Angel. "Just give me her money and I'll do without her looks," Mama replies. Or here is another mother, whose daughter has just said she hates to thin flower seedlings: "I know what you mean," says Mama. "It always broke my heart to thin corn. But you learn." Part of the appeal of this language is its blend of Midwestern nasality and Southern drawl, with echoes of Kentucky hill-farmer and Pike County yarn-spinner, all half-homogenized by the influence of movies and television. Occasionally Mason will single out some idiomatic oddity: "Most of my passengers are real poor country people," says a bus driver. "Use to, they'd be kept in the attic or out in the barn." *Use to*, now that's a collector's item, and so is this:

> "Did you hear about the datsun dog that killed the baby?"
> Norma Jean says, "The word is 'dachshund.' "

Mothers in Mason's fiction are frequently wrong in ways that sound funny. The following moment occurs as mother, daughter, and grandmother watch a movie on television:

> "Fred Astaire is the limberest thing I ever saw," says Mama.
> "I remember his sister Adele," says Grandmother. "She could really dance."

[2] SHILOH AND OTHER STORIES, by *Bobbie Ann Mason*. Harper & Row. $12.95.

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"Her name was Estelle," says Mama.
"Estelle Astaire?" says Sandra.

But mainly these characters do not sound odd or wrong, just plain, authentic, believable.

Mason left home to become a writer, and that seems only to have strengthened her appreciation of how her people talked and who they distinctively were. Her stories constantly document social facts, large and small: the TV set is usually on, tuned to Phil Donahue or "The Incredible Hulk" or "The Tonight Show"; teenagers wear orange jogging shoes and T-shirts with slogans like "Chattahoochee Super-Rat"; wives are check-out girls at Kroger's or K-Mart or they work part-time at H & R Block; the self-hypnosis of computer games supersedes the attraction of encounter groups which have already superseded church attendance ("The Retreat"). Baby showers, rook parties, and Christmas all bring people conventionally together, but the world has changed: the baby's sex has been determined, thanks to modern science; the rook party breaks up when discussion of a Richard Pryor movie offends someone ("Well, golly-Bill, I'm as Christian as the next one! . . . Them words don't mean anything against religion"); and Christmas is spoiled by an absent lover and a dominant stranger. When families break apart, Mason notices the non-predictability of the process: husbands head out west, then drift back, or unexpectedly settle down at home to the consternation of now restless wives ("Shiloh"), or withdraw into passivity ("The Rookers"); wives pull away from their husbands, surprising themselves ("The Climber," "The Retreat"), or they take lovers in doubtful detached ways ("Residents and Transients") or they escape home for a while and come back ("Nancy Culpepper"); grandparents feel the precariousness most ("Old Things," "The Ocean") and children least, but they're of course not immune ("Detroit Skyline, 1949"). There are no formulas about gender in Mason's scheme of things, nor in her characters'. When a husband learns that his wife means to leave him, he says, "Is this one of those women's lib things?" She answers, "Don't be funny."

If there are darker themes running through these cheerful stories, they concern the past *versus* the present and going *versus* staying. Several plots turn on a mistaken rejection of old things, identities as well as possessions. Mason's characters regularly uproot themselves only to feel lonely and afraid, the mobile home is sterile, the TV set and Teflon II pans don't compensate for what has been sold off. In "A New Wave Format" the middle-aged Edwin Creech takes a great notion to play disc jockey for his bus-load of mentally retarded passengers, playing cassettes of "mellow old sixties tunes" and getting requests for "Mr. Bojangles" or Elvis. Fancying himself "low-key, cool," and twenty years younger, Creech begins giving his audience the Grateful Dead, the Jefferson Airplane, and Janis Jop-

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lin, not realizing he is approaching a threshold with his vulnerable audience. The smash comes when he switches to The Doors: "The frantic beat was a perfect expression of [his passengers'] aimlessness and frustration." Edwin precipitates a near-disaster, and the story ends with his shame and remorse as he tries to tell his young wife about pain in the heart. Yet Mason stories never preach the superiority of the past or sink into nostalgia or lament irreparable losses. That bus-load of retarded folk is *delighted* by The Jefferson Airplane. A comparable balance is struck in Mason's Welty-like treatment of going *versus* staying. The apparent argument is all in favor of place. "Residents and Transients," about a woman whose ambitious husband has gone off to Louisville to be a "word processor," asserts the emptiness of that logic. "You've got to be flexible" is his argument; "you've got to be more open to the way things are." But the woman who doesn't want to leave home finds no great meaning in her affair with a local dentist. Mason leaves her heroine in the middle, ruminating on something she's read about wild cats: scientists now think that cats who stay put may not be stronger than the wanderers, who like certain Indians are nomadic adaptors and survivors. Open-ended as this and so many other of Mason's stories are, my sense is that she finds more value in the transient cats and people. The woman in this story thinks, "It may be that the transients are the superior ones after all, with the greatest curiosity and most intelligence." Despite Mason's pungent regionalism, she does not quite settle into one place, a Morgana or a Winesburg; two of these stories seem in fact to be set in Covington, Pennsylvania, the author's present home; and all of them are set in a culture immediately accessible to all of us—just travel straight to your TV set.

Margaret Atwood's short stories usually do not work.[3] While her novels suggest multiple resources—the unadorned immediacy of *Surfacing*, the boisterous inventiveness of *Lady Oracle*, the complex irony of *Bodily Harm*—these fourteen stories seem queerly deficient in originality. They span the dozen years Atwood has been writing fiction. Two stories may simply be warm-ups for *Bodily Harm* ("A Travel Piece" and "The Resplendent Quetzal"), but at least four of them are not so much imagined as driven forcibly by their sexual politics, and almost all of them suffer from stylistic monotony and predictability. "Under Glass" is composed mainly of the interior monologue of an unnamed woman suffering from the indifference of her slovenly lover, also unnamed. Recovering from an unexplained illness, she visits him, bringing food, and discovers he has drunkenly slept with someone else the night before. She stifles her anger, he makes his selfishness seem her fault, she lets him dominate her, he does. At the end she wants to be a plant, a stone, "under glass"—in a bell jar, I suspect. Atwood's Plathian rhetoric, pow-

[3] DANCING GIRLS, by *Margaret Atwood*. Simon & Schuster. $14.50.

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erful as it sometimes is, needs more human context than this story gives. It generates a pointless anger: the man is loathsome, the woman bottles up her rage. *C'est la vie*? I don't think so.

In "The Grave of the Famous Poet" an unnamed couple visit an unnamed but apparently English seacoast. Their unnamed relationship is disintegrating, but Atwood chooses not to say why, only to give the woman's increasing sense of alienation: "Close up, he's a strange terrain, pores and hairs; but he isn't nearer, he's further away, like the moon when you've finally landed on it." The terms remain general, categorical: "We love each other, that's true whatever it means, but we aren't good at it; for some it's a talent, for others only an addiction." A few details are sharply etched—the boarding house where they stay, the rocky beach, some ruins—but the woman doesn't feel anything, really, except that she ought to *feel something; and the man is, as she says, faceless. Perhaps a* poem could have come from such nebulous materials, but they do not make a story. Atwood's conception of the form seems to be this: a single interior monologue delivered in a generalized rhetoric, with all references to circumstantial and palpable reality kept to a minimum; a little dialogue is permitted but not essential. "A Travel Piece" is one of those manuscript-found-in-a-bottle devices; "When It Happens" is a Shirley Jackson-style nightmare; "Giving Birth" also ventures into fable; "Training" is about a sensitive boy who will have to grow up to become your typical male brute.

The clear exception to these disappointments is "Hair Jewellry" (1976), the pained memory of a woman's first real love. It too is a monologue, with parties unnamed (just "You" and "I") but Atwood anchors it convincingly in places: Filene's Basement in the fifties, slushy Boston streets, an old Salem hotel in winter. It also feels less narrow because the narrator is both herself now and as she was then, both experiencing youthful romance with agonizing self-deceptions and betrayals and observing them from a safe distance. The details (clothing, rooms, the cold) become metaphoric and are not outweighed by categorical statements. Best of all, Atwood displays her typically ironic sense of humor in this story: "Filene's Basement was, in its own way, tragic. No one went there who did not aspire to a shape-change, a transformation, a new life, but the things never did quite fit." Something of *Lady Oracle's* narrator is here too, with her sardonic self-criticism:

> That's my technique, I resurrect myself through clothes. In fact . . . every time I discard a sweater or a dress I am discarding part of my life. I shed identities like a snake, leaving them pale and shrivelled behind me, a trail of them, and if I want any memories at all I have to collect, one by one, those cotton and wool fragments, piece them together, achieving at last a patchwork self, no defence anyway against the cold.

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This has Atwood's characteristically hyperbolic intensity, a style that allows at last for freedom and resilience. Humor is her saving grace. When she uses it well, as in "Hair Jewellry," the bitter disappointments her characters suffer are put back in perspective. Without the humor, we get nothing but Ms. Found in a Bottle.

Alice Munro is rooted much more firmly in Canadian soil than her younger contemporary Atwood, and is perfectly at home in the short story form. In fact, counting her one novel (*Lives of Girls and Women*, 1971) as the loosely-synthesized group of stories it really is, she writes nothing but stories, and this is her fifth book of them.[4] While her previous collection, *The Beggar Maid* (1979), followed the *Golden Apples* genre, this one is unified less by native place in rural Ontario northwest of Toronto than by narrative mode: reminiscence of childhood, early love, odd and wonderful relatives, marital upheavals. Munro uses the town of Hanratty from her previous book just once ("Accident"), for its quintessentially provincial value (*everybody* knows about the narrator's furtive affair with a married man), but the story gains its power from recollection. The settings of other stories range from British Columbia to New Brunswick and from Toronto to Australia. Munro organizes them to emphasize her characters' origins, with stories about her own relatives at the beginning and end. These turn out to be perhaps the best, certainly the most eloquent.

Munro has an undramatic, slow-paced storytelling manner, and that has tempted some critics to think her a naturalist. But the plain-spoken manner is deceptive. "The Stone in the Field" begins, "My mother was not a person who spent all her time frosting the rims of glasses and fancying herself descended from the aristocracy. She was a businesswoman really, a trader and a dealer." Or this is the style of "The Turkey Season": "When I was fourteen I got a job at the Turkey Barn for the Christmas season. I was still too young to get a job working in a store or as a part-time waitress; I was also too nervous. I was a turkey gutter." No hothouse of subjectivity; no ambiguous tangle of relationships; we know exactly where we are. Endings are another matter, however. "Connections" rises to an elegiac resonance that reminded me strongly of the best moments in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*; I can only hope a longish selection will convey it. The context is a memory of childhood, a summer night, and all the relatives singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat":

> I lie in bed beside my little sister, listening to the singing in the yard. Life is transformed, by these voices, by these presences, by their high spirits and grand esteem, for themselves and each other. My parents, all of us, are on holiday. The mixture of voices and words is so complicated and varied it seems that such confu-

[4] THE MOONS OF JUPITER, by *Alice Munro*. Knopf. $12.95.

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sion, such jolly rivalry, will go on forever, and then to my surprise—for I am surprised, even though I know the pattern of rounds—the song is thinning out, you can hear the two voices striving.

Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily,
Life is but a dream.

These moments of transcendence in Munro's fiction—visionary, celebratory—are painstakingly earned. Their context is always death, loss, the irrevocable past, and they are untainted by sentiment. "The Stone in the Field" concludes with the narrator's refusal to prettify her past: "The life buried here is one you have to think twice about regretting."

Munro prefers mystery to solutions, an enhancement of life to any explanation or rationalization. In "The Turkey Season," a fine story of a girl's dawning awareness of adult sexuality, the remembering narrator backs away from any explanation of the man she once so admired; he may have been homosexual, he may not: "How attractive [she thinks], how delectable, the prospect of intimacy is, with the very person who will never grant it." In "Visitors" the exasperatingly dull relatives just sit around the carport and do nothing, until old Albert shocks them all with his remembrance of a hermit who ate flesh. Questioned about the story, he sets them straight: "It's not a story. It's something that happened." And that is Munro's idea of narrative too: a way of relating experience, not inventing it, giving shape and clarity to something that happened. The most telling moment of "Accident" comes at the end, when the narrator goes back to her home town for her mother's funeral and recognizes how utterly accidental has been the plot of her life. She had thought she was an outsider, one who did not have to settle for a provincial fate, one who took chances, whose character determined her life. Looking back now, it seems that a stranger's casual decision to run an errand in his car led to the accident that determined her life. Then comes a deeper recognition: despite all the accidents of her life she remains what she always was, the same self "ticking away" inside.

The only weakness of Munro's stories may be their tendency toward diffusion or multiple focus. "Hard-Luck Stories" and "Bardon Bus" shift too often in place and time; "Labor Day Dinner" has too many people; "Prue" is too hesitant and qualified. But Munro always uses the language with precise elegance, and her themes—memory, transience, love—are never simplified. The protagonist of "Labor Day Dinner" writes in her journal,

I know nostalgia is a futile emotion. Sometimes I feel like tearing out some things I have written where perhaps I have been too

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> harsh in judging certain people or situations but I have decided to leave everything because I want to have a record of what I really felt at the time. I want to have a truthful record of my whole life. How to keep oneself from lying I see as the main problem everywhere.

That sums up Alice Munro's art perfectly.

The prolific Paul Theroux has produced a sequel to *The Consul's File*, another series of stories about the same young diplomat.[5] He now leaves his post in Malaysia and ascends to the status of political officer at the American Embassy in London, a heady switch from his Conradian-Orwellian outpost of progress in Ayer Hitam to "the center of the civilized world, the best place in Europe, the last habitable big city. . . . every English speaker's spiritual home." Clever, aggressive, very savvy and critical, sometimes condescending, Theroux's hero manages most of his tasks successfully, maneuvers in British society shrewdly, and is rewarded at the end with a beautiful green-eyed blonde. Or that is ostensibly the pattern. It led one British reviewer to declare Theroux's attitude toward London insufferable, that of complacent observer at a freak show. But the real argument is far different from that, and subtler. First, the hero is not the author; second, he is not the hero; and third, he understands far less than he thinks. His rhetoric about London ("the last habitable city"; his "spiritual home") is thoroughly undercut as the book develops: in "Reception" he imagines himself making a social debut only to learn he's at work; in "An English Unofficial Rose" he angles for an attractive woman and ends up paying through the nose; toward the end he gazes down into these same habitable, civilized streets as they are torn by riots. Love is a problem for this man: kindness, generosity, friendship, sympathy do not come naturally or easily to him, and his self-approval is as unconscious as it is strong. Theroux cleverly sabotages this ego in story after story, and the leopard never changes his spots.

Theroux's favorite device is to put the "I" in a position *like* that of the person he's telling us an amusing anecdote about, as an ironic mockery of his presumed distance. In "Namesake" a fellow diplomat who is an American black maneuvers the narrator into the same position as the racist Britisher. In "Charlie Hogle's Earring" the narrator finds himself helplessly in collusion with the anti-gay prejudice of his boss. In "Tomb with a View" the narrator gets the task of doing something about a landlady's mysterious Muslim lodger. It turns out the fellow has been robbing the grave of Sir Robert Burton and hiding the spoils under his bed. Impervious to the poetic justice of this (the grave is loaded with sacred objects, Burton's spoils), our narrator takes it upon himself to punish the Muslim

[5] THE LONDON EMBASSY, by *Paul Theroux*. Houghton Mifflin. $13.95.

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avenger, trapping him in the tomb all night and next morning terrifying him with a sign of the cross before putting him to flight. The real farce here is the narrator's moral presumption, as he concludes the tale of his clever triumph: "I had left everything just where it belonged in the tomb, as anyone could see." *Where it belonged*, indeed! In "Neighbors" the narrator's Anglophilia gets another spanking when his stereotype of decent British reticence leads him into an unwitting harassment of his neighbor. Last habitable city for whom? Though he never seems to have a guilty conscience, the narrator comes away with dirty hands every time.

Theroux operates in the tradition of concise surgical irony that extends from Mérimée and Maupassant in the nineteenth century to Maugham and Roald Dahl in our own. The entertainment tends to be heartless, the comedy bitter. Theroux tempts us to be amused by his narrator's cleverness (which is in part his own, of course), by the series of pathetic eccentrics who parade through his life, but the final effect is that the joke's on him. The point of "The Man on the Clapham Omnibus" is the narrator's inability to see the people he meets, so fixed are his stereotypes. He mistakes an impoverished old baronet for a butler. Ready to reverence the aristocratic Sir Charles Smallwood, he's annoyed by the "tetchy and suspicious," "peevish" and "know-it-all" manservant, so he flashes an impressive American Embassy calling card. Impressed by a fine old sherry glass, he despises its cheap contents. He can share none of the melancholy and guilt of Smallwood's personal history, nor heed its warnings about the delusions of aristocracy. The narrator remains smitten with his ambition and his success; his chief concern is to pass successfully for a gentleman, diplomat, man-of-the-world. His aggression leads him regularly into well-earned frustration, self-pity, annoyance, and rejection—abundant proof, if only he would notice, that he remains an outsider. If this is indeed Theroux's way of coming around to praise London and its people, the device may be too subtle. There's a lingering suspicion that the narrator's mask sticks.

Born in England, Bruce Chatwin traveled through many countries and several careers before placing himself as a novelist. Auctioneer at Sotheby's for eight years, African wanderer, architecture student in Scotland, journalist, Chatwin eventually published a very successful travel book (*In Patagonia*, 1978) and a fictionalized history (*The Viceroy of Ouidah*, 1980) before turning to fiction. The result is an astonishingly believable novel set in the Welsh Border country of England, a family and a regional chronicle so palpably real that some reviewers (it appeared in England almost a year ago) treated it as if it were documented history.[6] The story centers on identical twin brothers, Lewis and Benjamin Jones, who sheep-farm

[6] ON THE BLACK HILL, by *Bruce Chatwin*. Viking. $14.75.

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near the village of Maesyfelin all their lives. Shaped by conflicts of their Brangwenian parents, a beloved mother who is literate, imaginative and traveled (Mary) and a brawny, inarticulate father (Amos), the twins suffer some consequences. Literate yet innocent, passionate yet chaste, beset by antipathies and longings yet locked in place, they manage to prosper together on the farm, and the outside world does not, in the main, impinge. They are psychically interdependent, capable of thinking each other's thoughts and feeling each other's pain. They can quarrel without speaking, and when Lewis is beaten—or seduced—Benjamin experiences it too. Chatwin does not play this up as some case study of monozygotic ESP. He invites us to take it as perfectly natural. Benjamin tends to be the more fearful, passive and contemplative, the shrewder one; Lewis seems bolder and more active, drawn passionately to airplanes and tractors and certain women, yet he's the more innocent and vulnerable. Neither is the other's secret sharer or dark double, for the simple reason that like all identical twins they resemble each other too much. Wisely, Chatwin stays outside their points of view most of the time. When Lewis suddenly blurts out many miles away from Benjamin, "My brother's freezing," it is simply a fact, not some projection of inner needs.

The outside world must, of course, impinge on this symbiosis. Chatwin's chronicle is at least as much about the community as about the twins: there is crazy old Watkins, the coffin-maker who nearly ruins Amos, and Rosie Fifield who spurns Lewis and other men and ends up a witch of the woods, and Mr. Arkwright the self-righteous lawyer who poisons his wife, and Colonel Bickerton the English squire who owns most of the tenanted farmland, and Joy and Nigel Lambert the city sophisticates who dwell for a time nearby looking for sensations aesthetic and sexual, and Theo the pure-of-heart hippie who stays on after the commune disintegrates, and the London antique dealer who swindles the twins out of a precious writing cabinet, and Thomas Tuke the Anglican clergyman and Greek scholar who doubts the Bible ("And who, after all were the Israelites? Sheep-thieves, my dear! A tribe of wandering sheep-thieves!"). A complete list would take several more paragraphs. Chatwin has managed to suggest both the flux and the fixity of this populous community, its constant departures and arrivals, its simmering antagonisms, and its complex interdependence. Outsiders come and go; world wars reverberate, threaten, and recede; airplanes crash and are recorded in Lewis' scrapbook; but the center holds. One of the strangest and best effects of the chronicle occurs when Chatwin casually reminds us of the present—American hostages in Teheran, computer games in the pub. It's like being jolted away from a dream where all the rhythms were natural, mythic and Biblical.

Chatwin casts his spell very artfully indeed. His basic technique is

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to dwell on nothing. With short paragraphs and simple declarative sentences one after another, the vividness seems to lie in the material itself, as if it were merely information:

> He was a thin wiry boy with unusually strong hands and ears that stuck out under his cap, like dock-leaves. He was fourteen. He had the moustache of a fourteen-year-old, and a lot of blackheads on his nose. He was glad to get work away from home, and he had just been baptized.

Commonly, a one-sentence paragraph is all Chatwin wants: "The room was always dark and smelled of lavender and mothballs." Or, after the non-combatant twins fight some soldiers: "They were alone again, with swollen eyes and the taste of blood on their lips." Or a chapter will begin, "The war washed over them without disturbing their solitude." So much for that, and the story moves ahead. Perhaps the most affecting one-sentence paragraph of all comes after the mother's death: "In the morning they hung black crepe over the beehives to tell the bees that she had gone." The effect is aways rapid, a series of moments caught like snapshots in an album. Tempted into fast reading, one may not realize at first how good the language is, how subtle its rhythms and precise its diction:

> Stubble jowled farmers were gorging great quantities of suet and black-pudding; and a gentleman chaffed the waitress for failing to serve him. From time to time, the clatter of plates broke through the hubbub, and a volley of curses was heard through the kitchen hatch. Whiffs of frying-fat and tobacco filled the room. A tabby cat slipped in and out among the customers' legs and, on the floor, there were patches of beer-sodden sawdust.

Equally artful is Chatwin's technique of giving more emphasis to preliminaries than to the big events themselves. Just before Amos' death come the details of his brood-mares, a sketch of Merlin Evans who will bring the stallion to breed them, mention of the sky and the bird noises and the preparations for sheep-shearing. Then one sentence ends the episode: "The hoof caught him under the chin, and the sparrows went on chattering." Similarly oblique is the treatment of Lewis rescuing Benjamin in a snowstorm: the focus is all on what Lewis was doing miles away before he sensed his brother's danger. Instead of a climactic moment Chawin simply has the twins wake up together the next morning.

Yet the narrative method is more personal than it seems. When a salad plate has "a *glissando* of cucumber slices" or the stricken Amos is "stretched out on the hearthrug, mouth open and *fish-eyes gaping* at the rafters" (my italics), the narrator makes his presence felt.

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Normally self-effacing, he is nevertheless willing to ornament a line or issue some snap judgments. Here is his rendition of the Welsh nationalist preacher:

> Mr. Isaac Lewis, in a suit of goose-shit green, was standing by the door to greet his flock. He had the odd habit of cupping his hands in front of his mouth, and gave the impression of wanting to catch his previous statement and cram it back between his teeth.

By the end, when the narrator shifts into the present tense, he seems virtually among his characters, more a person than a raconteur, who mentions them all familiarly. The close reads like social notes in a small-town newspaper. At last report Theo is mountain-climbing in India and Rosie Fifield "likes to watch hang-gliding off the summit of Bickerton's Knob" with her new binoculars. For all I know, that may not be fiction.

The moments Maureen Howard handles best in her latest novel are all marginal: off moments, when people are a little irregularly off by themselves, between one place and another, and they think about letting go a little, taking off from roles, duties, identities.[7] The novel begins with a memorable one of these: Maude, a middle-aged American widow, is driving home from a visit to her mother in a nursing home. Unready to let go of her suburban-maternal identity yet fearful of the future which seems to hold only death, she finds herself fantasizing an accident, scenes of crude lust, anything: a truck driver "jacking me up," a sweaty teen-age boy "whose braces will cut my lips as we kiss," a chilly tryst in a musty cabin. The violence of these notions is what disturbs and tempts her, and she rather dismally acts out one of them by taking a melancholy antique dealer from along this same highway as her lover. Maude's teen-age daughter Elizabeth is in between things too: unpopular and ungainly, she hovers between sullen childhood and an adult singing career (as it turns out), just as much later in her life she will hover between motherhood and her next step. Raucous Elizabeth belting out pop songs on the schoolbus, to the astonishment of all, or Maude shamelessly spying on the crazy recluses next door: these are the images Howard's narrative fixes upon; they are less events than a series of interludes of dislocation and estrangement. Howard seems to be saying these moments are both necessary in life and scary. What if you get stuck in between?

In Maude's next phase she has remarried, and found a profession in child psychotherapy. Now it's her patients who are in between, and Maude's function is to coax them along. In the most affecting segment of the novel, almost a Salingerian fable, little

[7] GRACE ABOUNDING, by *Maureen Howard*. Little, Brown. $13.95.

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Warren Bidart comes for his daily session. He's brilliant but autistic, off in his own hellish world, scabbed and raw from his scratching. Howard neatly gives some of this episode from loveless Mrs. Bidart's point of view: "And what was she to do for fifty minutes while Warren goes off and says God knows what to the woman." Caught in between herself, Mrs. Bidart goes through a nearly frantic series of twitches: she does her face, reads in a book about the female body, stares angrily at the decor, takes a pill, reads in a trashy romance. "I'm in graphics," she has said. "How can I work? I'm upset." The details about Warren are good in a different way: he plays dead, pounds his head on the couch, invents words like *botto* and *pana thay*, touches Maude's skirt expressionlessly, and cries methodically every Friday because a weekend of silence lies ahead.

The next in-between moment comes when a snowstorm snarls everybody's plans: Maude wanted some time to herself; Bert Lasser her husband (now) meant to fly to Texas; pregnant Elizabeth meant to do some shopping on a last-minute fling before motherhood; Gus her lawyer husband meant to spend the evening reading lengthy depositions. They all end up at the Lasser's New York apartment, improvising supper, seeing each other from unanticipated angles. Gus seems to be the odd man out here, the one who never drifts marginally, never lets go, has work to do and does it. The novel concludes with several more interludes, notably when Bert in Puerto Rico for a convention has time on his hands before flying home and decides on an impulse to stop off in Florida to visit his son, an Episcopalian minister. But son Ted is occupied, and when the ambivalent father overhears his son's role-playing voice, he's both put off and embarrassed. The novel ends with a final instance: Ted Lasser without his clerical collar, drinking beer with an unmarried couple he knows, hiding in one of the few margins of his life. Howard's language is precise and gratifyingly immediate, and her unobtrusive patterning is subtler than I have made it sound; but her story suffers from the absence of a strong central action. It is neither a series of stories nor a fully harmonized novel; instead of one person or one place for a focus, it has a type of psychological moment, and that is not enough. I am at a loss to explain the notion of abounding grace in the title; far stronger than any affirmations of Maude and Elizabeth who "find" themselves (that happens offstage) is the pattern of characters who perversely, self-seductively lose themselves. Three-year-old Warren is the type of them all.

Mr. Wrong was the funny title of Elizabeth Jane Howard's last book, a collection of stories, and now—in her seventh novel since 1950—she takes what seems the unlikeliest neutered male imaginable and makes him Mr. Right.[8] He's Gavin Lamb, a thirty-one-year-old hairdresser in London's West End, who lives at home with

[8] GETTING IT RIGHT, by *Elizabeth Jane Howard*. Viking. $13.95.

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his bullying Mum and his silent downtrodden Dad, has a passion for music (classical), a sympathetic homosexual friend, and a bad case of timidity. Naturally, he's a virgin. Howard manages to make Gavin winning partly by making everybody else ludicrous, ranging from the hilarious to the grotesque. Gavin's mother is an expert martyr, whose cooking may be "scalding, dizzily sweet, [or] briney beyond belief," but any hint of criticism produces tears and tirades. "Pears are good for your complexion," she says. "There's strychnine in pears." Mr. Lamb is also roasted: after forcing down the awful food he hurries "to get back to television before the programmes get too highbrow." Gavin's boss, Mr. Adrian, is a self-righteous posturer who spends most of the time playing the ponies and wearing his "extremely skilful toupee." The salon is well-fixed with customers like Mrs. Wagstaffe and her dachshund Sherry: "He was a dog of few words, but he had a lightning snap, designed to harass and unnerve his target, rather than actually to draw blood." Polite Gavin puts his mind in neutral while his customers talk about themselves, allowing himself an occasional mental jibe:

> "You know me. I'm *not* very adventurous about my hair, I'm afraid."
>
> The ways in which [this dull woman] might have been adventurous to make up for this lapse were unknown to Gavin, but he smiled gently and began combing her hair.

Sometimes the *sotto voce* is blunter: "Her appearance had struck him forcibly as that of a heavy-weight policeman in County drag."

But Gavin is likable for his timidity. The problem is not that he's just too polite or too decent; he is basically, with most people, e.g. women, terrified. With a sort of Prufrockian-Lucky Jim self-irony, he thinks of it as "a kind of Ladder of Fear":

> [It] began with meeting people he already knew, and thence, step by step, having to talk to them, having to talk to *one* of them, meeting someone he *did not* know, and having to talk to *them*—until it ascended the astral plane of meeting a beautiful girl *alone* and having to talk to *her* . . .

Naturally, Gavin has some warmish fantasies about delectable seminude damsels on beaches, remote from the shampoo-and-set crowd. But how to make them come true? Howard exploits this wry situation for all it's worth. Beleaguered at work and at home by women, Gavin soon finds himself targeted by maternal Muriel, his sister's aging friend ("She didn't even want a Prince Charming, Fred Charming would do her perfectly well"), entangled with a neurotic-anorexic nymph named Minerva, and drawn to the wealthy and worldly Joan, an actressy type. Howard uses what I think of as the

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Iris Murdoch strategy, surrounding her epicene hero with a gallery of women who can then be described in lavish detail; but Howard does it for comic purposes. As Gavin gradually climbs up the Ladder of Fear, slipping down a few rungs frequently, his problem becomes the difficulty of squaring those heated fantasies with the requirements of real love; or in Howard's terms, "getting it right."

But that is the weakness of the script. When Gavin begins to see which woman his author has in mind for him, the comedy turns into a bit of a lesson. Gavin is made to forget about Minerva, which is uncharacteristic of him and a disappointment to the reader. She and her parents, Sir Gordon and Lady Munday, have made Gavin memorably uncomfortable, and one hates to see him avoid these predicaments too thoroughly. One also rebels when the sophisticate Joan becomes too much of a Reality Instructor for Gavin, equipping him so wisely with a Wyatt poem that tells all about love: methinks Joan's mask is worn by the author here. It would have been more fun to keep Gavin entangled in his wrong choices even while it dawns on him what the best one must be. Perhaps the novel is simply a bit too long. In any case it's a funny and serious love story, in which even the caricatured bits ring true. Here is the alcoholic Lady Munday, when her husband criticizes her having a second gin: "For an answer, she tipped the glass to her mouth and drank in steady gulps with her eyes fixed upon him—like a child drinking milk." What a shame the book's dust jacket looks like an advertisement for cheap American bubble bath.

William Kennedy came to fiction after a long career as a newspaperman in Albany, where he was born and where all three of his novels are set.[9] Reissued in paperback alongside his newest book, *Legs* (1975) still seems the best and *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game* (1978) almost as good. They both reek of city room slang, love of fact, bottom-line bluntness, and headline speed. *Legs* is a shade more convincing, not because it dramatizes an historic figure, the infamous Jack "Legs" Diamond, but because he is created for us by a narrator, his sidekick lawyer Marcus Gorman, and because Gorman pieces the story together from memories. Twice-distanced, the speakeasies and gangsters and fast talk seem both immediate and legendary, with Irish Catholic Albany as a microcosm of the thirties. Like E. L. Doctorow, Kennedy uses an outmoded style, the sort that Dos Passos and Hammett and Harold McCoy used (expletives and sex added), but the effect snags on anachronisms and too much verbal touching-up. *Ironweed* focuses on Francis Phelan, Billy's father, who backed out of home decades ago, killed a man in a streetcar-strike riot, and has been a hobo and stumblebum ever since, he doesn't really know why. Francis makes some money digging graves

[9] IRONWEED, by *William Kennedy*. Viking. $14.75. LEGS, by *William Kennedy*. Penguin. $5.95p. BILLY PHELAN'S GREATEST GAME, by *William Kennedy*. Penguin. $5.95p.

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and clopping about the city with old Rosskam in his junk wagon ("Raaaa-aaaaaags!"), trying to stay warm and get drunk, seeing a few old friends, meeting a few ghosts, making a pathetic visit to his old home. Sadly, because Kennedy is an earnest writer who is not after flashy effects, the book fails to convince. Fine writing creeps in to overpower the colloquial rightness. The blear-eyed bum is made to think, "He was at war with himself, his private factions mutually bellicose, and if he was ever to survive, it would be with the help not of any socialistic god but with a clear head and a steady eye for the truth; for the guilt he felt was not worth the dying." Francis needs some sympathetic person to remember him for us and conjecture his feelings. Without something like that, the effect is sentimental and incredible. As the title suggests, Kennedy wants us to value his protagonist as a survivor, an archetype, a perennial: "The name refers to the toughness of the stem," runs the epigraph from the Audubon Field Guide. Kennedy harms his camera-eye authenticity, however, when these archetypes creep into the text. Here for contrast is how much more deftly Kennedy handles the archetypal Jack Diamond:

> So the newsmen, installing Jack in the same hierarchy where they placed royalty, heroes, and movie stars, created him anew as they enshrined him. They invented a version of him with each story they wrote, added to his evil luster by imagining crimes for him to commit . . . Jack had imagined his fame all his life and now it was imagining him.

This leaves Jack free to say, "Good stuff. Sounds like one of my dreams." Here's hoping that Kennedy can put down his copies of Jung and Huizenga, and go back to the city room.

Place is even more crucial to the stories of Dianne Benedict, the recent Iowa Short Fiction Award winner.[10] Her native landscape is the sheep-farming flatland of central and west Texas, and it gives austere beauty and range to her isolated and embattled characters. She has noted, "If I try to write about anything but the people, the land, and the roots of my beginnings, the pages turn to sawdust . . . " Her sense of place registers in voices ("He had a voice like a nail coming out of the wood slowly"), in eyes of animals and people ("clean dark fire flashed from its eyes") and in visions like this one:

> Overhead, the evening sky had taken on an ancient light, as if the Egyptians or the Chaldeans were closing their shades and pulling in the oars of their long boats, and across this illumination, hundreds of calling geese moved in shifting lines from horizon to horizon.

[10] SHINY OBJECTS, by *Dianne Benedict*. University of Iowa Press. $12.95; $8.95.

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More often, however, Benedict conveys the place by a flatness in her style, naming plain things: a muddy truck, a rutted road, "a streak of red on the horizon," chinaberry trees, the Pleeze-U-Cafe. Most of the time the manner is so unemphatic you hardly notice the craft: "Mrs. Gilnetter unrolled her arms from her apron and moved out of the shadow of the persimmon tree," or "Guess we'll be looking for rain," one character says. When she tries too hard, Benedict quickly moves into a prose tinged with rhetoric; but her plain-spoken directness saves her. The plots turn upon sudden eruptions of evil or affliction—a murder, a theft, a violent separation. As one glum character puts it, "No matter how old you were nor how young you were you could never trust anyone to look after you." And when people do come together, with a suggestion of love and celebration (as in the title story), affliction is there as well. In the usually wide open spaces between people Benedict keeps showing us the parching sun, the endless dust, the enormous distance of the stars. Sherwood Anderson's influence is sometimes apparent in the naive manner and Flannery O'Connor must have shaped something of the way Benedict uses violence to instruct her characters, but the territory is clearly her own. She finds poetry in particular shades of clay and dust and mud.

At the risk of analyzing my own fingerprints, I want to offer some conclusions about all the fiction discussed above. None of it is particularly political, none of it pioneeringly new, none of it very daring. Nobody is sounding barbaric yawps or indulging in verbal wildness, improvisation, or extravaganza. The performative flamboyance of Bellow, Barth, Pynchon and others has died out; and nobody seems to be re-inventing the novel now or trying anything fabulous and large scale. Humor and verbal fun—wit, allusion, parody—have fallen off greatly. The new novels by Mailer and Anthony Burgess seem almost throwbacks. Nobody has chosen a large canvas upon which the story might travel across the country or voyage to other nations. If these are losses, there are some splendid compensations: most of the recent writing gains strength, like Antaeus, by having its feet on the ground. Mason, Munro, Chatwin, Theroux, Kennedy, and Benedict all fix themselves firmly in a place, and give us a variety of characters who populate it. Insecure identities are everywhere, and going home to seek redefinition is common. Short stories seem the better form to express the way we live now: the fragmentation, isolation, and limitation, the sense of chastened possibilities and fixed fates. The present tense in storytelling has become everybody's device, to prove immediacy and authenticity perhaps. It seems that women are more convincing than men in analyzing sex and love, marriages and families, and in exploring seriously our private selves. Whatever the gender, a great many writers have decided to cultivate their own gardens, and do some housekeeping.

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MARVIN MUDRICK

The Recording Angel Tunes Out

KLEIST IN HIS FICTION stays cool despite the ambient heat, he writes like the Recording Angel about hell on earth and other predicaments, knows it all already, wants corroboration rather than evidence, notes without fuss or fume the horrid particulars. Indeed the first we hear of him (in his earliest surviving letter, March 1793), aged fifteen, he has just left home for the first time and is unblinkingly seeing the world, where as if by prearrangement or fiat he encounters from out of nowhere persons and conditions that would be right at home in any of his stories—those tales of extremity, hair-raisers and blockbusters every one, fables of power he hasn't yet even dreamed of but many years later will be setting down with the same fluent lucidity as this account of his Gothic initiation:

> Near Naumberg there is a tall cliff; an old fortress stood on top of it. A hundred-year-old man, they told me, was the solitary inhabitant of this knightly castle; no sooner had I heard this than I resolved to see it. But when I stepped on a loose stone, it broke away and I fell about five feet, which discouraged my adventure and might have had more serious consequences if Herr Meier, our fellow traveler, had not caught me. On the road from Gotha to Eisenach, deep in the mountains, we met a man who did not seem very different in aspect from a common highway robber. He climbed up furtively on the rear of the coach, and when the coachman caught sight of him he began flailing at him with his whip. He remained sitting quite still beneath the blows. The coachman stood up on his seat while driving and whipped him till he was down. Now the man began to scream horribly. Just think of us in those mountains, all alone, where every sound is twice as loud, and this man yelling so fearsomely. To us it seemed not *one* voice but twenty, for the screams came back redoubled from every mountainside. This frightened the horses, they bolted; the coachman, still standing on his seat, fell down; the man went on bellowing behind us, until finally one of us grabbed the reins. We then showed the robber our bare sabers (and he most certainly was a robber) and we asked him what he wanted of us—he answered with yelling and roaring and clamor . . .

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—as if life weren't already eventful enough: this passage is from a letter[1] that Kleist, a soldier en route to the front, writes back home to his aunt, who is now his legal guardian because his father died long ago and his mother just last month; coping with domestic tragedy like the tight-assed Prussian youth he is; scion of a six-centuries-old family of the military nobility, the Junker class, hence cadet officer (at fifteen) in the King of Prussia's personal regiment on wartime duty with an army of the Fatherland deploying to engage the Revolutionary French invaders; trained to anticipate a hero's death in the field or if not, then at least a bemedaled and bureaucratic career at court in Berlin. Except he keeps coming across the strangest things, and recording them with documentary distinctness.

Kleist's stories[2] are the most original ever—what Poe's would be if Poe were what Baudelaire and Mallarmé imagined he was. They are occasions and pretexts for stupefying and unprecedented tests and trials, outlandish actions and reactions, bizarre conjunctions, bursts and torrents of violence, monstrous paradoxes and contradictions, conflagrations of superhuman energy, vindications of obsession and revenge, triumphs of justice over law, drum-and-trumpet victories of passion over catastrophe and death and damnation, moral and metaphysical challenges to the world and its divinities; and simultaneously they are history (therefore undeniable), adapted from historical materials, recreating in spare and authoritative detail the atmosphere of the time, written with the look of truth and no nonsense about it that ought to be the envy of any writer of history or fiction:

> Toward the middle of the sixteenth century, there lived on the banks of the Havel a horse dealer by the name of Michael Kohlhaas, the son of a schoolmaster, one of the most upright and at the same time one of the most terrible men of his day. Until his thirtieth year this extraordinary man would have been thought the very model of a good citizen. In a village that still bears his name, he owned a farm on which he quietly earned a living by his trade; the children with whom his wife presented him were brought up in the fear of God to be industrious and honest; there was not one of his neighbors who had not benefited from his benevolence or his fair-mindedness—the world, in short, would have had every reason to bless his memory, if he had not

[1] AN ABYSS DEEP ENOUGH: Letters of Heinrich von Kleist With a Selection of Essays and Anecdotes, edited, translated and introduced by *Philip B. Miller*. Dutton. $16.95.

[2] Which I discussed at length and with unrestrained enthusiasm in "I Don't Care What Mama Don't Allow," *Hudson Review*, XXXI (Spring 1978), 187–195.

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> carried one virtue to excess. But his sense of justice turned him into a brigand and murderer.

This is the opening paragraph of the greatest novella ever, "Michael Kohlhaas: From an Old Chronicle," which among numerous other bedazzlements is Kleist's most masterly and unemphatic instance of building, page after page and episode after episode, a train of provocations and outrages so excruciatingly more and more unendurable according to the rules of history and fiction that the *reader* is beside himself with indignation ready to declare that only a God who doesn't exist could permit such things to happen—and thank God! at last the train of events turns out after all to have been a train of powder that has burned all the way to the bomb of human possibility:

> With this handful of men, at nightfall of the third day, he attacked the castle, riding down the tollkeeper and gateman as they stood in conversation in the gateway, and while Herse [Kohlhaas's groom, the first victim of the outrages], amid the sudden bursting into flames of all the barracks in the castle yard, raced up the winding stairs of the castle keep and with thrusts and blows fell upon the castellan and the steward, who were sitting half undressed over a game, Kohlhaas dashed into the castle in search of the Junker Wenzel. In such fashion does the angel of judgment descend from heaven. The Junker, who was in the middle of reading aloud the decree sent him by the horse dealer, amid uproarious laughter, to a crowd of young friends staying with him, had no sooner heard the latter's voice than he turned pale as a corpse, cried out, "Brothers, save yourselves!" and vanished. Kohlhaas, entering the hall, grabbed hold of a Junker Hans von Tronka as the latter came at him and flung him into a corner of the room with such force that his brains splattered over the stone floor, and asked, as the other knights, who had drawn their swords, were being routed and overpowered by his men: where was the Junker Wenzel von Tronka? But, seeing that the stunned men knew nothing, he kicked open the doors of the two rooms leading into the castle wings, searched up and down the rambling structure and, finding no one, went down, cursing, into the castle yard to post guards at the exits. In the meantime, dense clouds of smoke were billowing skywards from the castle and its wings, which had caught fire from the barracks, and, while Sternbald and three other men were busy heaping up everything that was not nailed down tight and heaving it out among the horses for plunder, the corpses of the castellan and the steward, with those of their wives and children, came hurtling out of the open windows of the castle keep accompanied by Herse's exultant shouts . . .

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—and that's just the beginning, folks: so far Kohlhaas is only rather irritated; wait till he and his merry men work up a head of steam and from murder and pillage to proclamations and pitched battles gradually extend their activities to cover the civilized world. Kleist is writing less than a generation after the French Revolution and still in its tremendous shadow; upstart Napoleon is Emperor of France and scourge of the anointed kings of Europe, including Prussia's Frederick William III; one wonders what sort of impression "Michael Kohlhaas" made on Kleist's fellow Junkers, who if they read it were probably not so much interested in its idea of justice against all odds as in its blueprint representation of the overthrow of law and order by a nobody leading a pack of nobodies.

Whatever the effect on a susceptible reader, they needn't have worried about Kleist himself. The stories aren't political or even moral: if the end is "justice," the means are so disproportionate to it as to hurl it absentmindedly out the window along with the rest of the corpses; the only hope against all odds isn't mob action but the individual human will (which, measuring it at infinity and zero respectively, Nietzsche and Kafka took as the primary value of human life too and thus admired Kleist the other side idolatry for making such a stir about it); the stories succeed because even in death and damnation the terrific heroes against all odds succeed. Furthermore, in almost everything outside his stories Kleist was a rather conventional and politically harmless literary type. His plays—at any rate the "masterpieces": *Penthesilea* and *The Prince of Homburg*—are a mixture of high sententiousness and low melodrama that on a rainy afternoon in Munich might look like somebody's dark night of the soul (as for the ineffable French—Gide in his journals, trying hard to add a new author to his collection, could do no better after a rollercoaster ride of pros and cons than decide that "It would be improper, irreverent to laugh . . . the very blemishes and defects of *Penthesilea* are its successes": work *that* out! you readers who don't happen to be French intellectuals).

In the letters also, once he leaves behind him the mere unvarnished truth-telling of that early mountain scene and grows up to con a woman into taking him seriously, he doesn't sound very different from other literary types. The Recording Angel wrote the (first letter and the) stories; *Angst* wrote the plays; Rousseau (ministering to the delightful malleability of his new Heloise) and the Brotherhood of Male Chauvinist Pigs wrote most of the letters, which do more to give education a bad name than anything else I've read since Plato's *Republic*: "Read my instruction thoroughly and often. It would be best if you learned it all by heart"; "Place all your faith in me"; "I do not know, Wilhelmine, if you can regard these ideas, Truth and Education, with the same piety I do. Of course you must if you are to understand this account of the progress of my soul"; "Have you learned your lessons by heart?"; "Per-

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haps I shall receive your essay—or have you not yet finished it? Well, there is no haste. . . . Yes, Wilhelmine, if you could afford me the joy of seeing your constant progress in your education with all your heart and soul, so to form a wife and mother as I should wish for myself and my children: enlightened, instructed, unprejudiced, ever obedient to Reason, gladly giving from the heart . . ."; "if someday your sense for the Beautiful has been elevated somewhat and refined, then read all this once again. And then you will understand it"; "I wish only to make clear what perhaps slumbers darkly in your soul" (well, dear, if there's nothing else, why don't you let me chop up the onions for the meatloaf . . .); "All genuine enlightenment of womankind depends finally on one thing: she must be able to reflect on the purpose of her *earthly life*"; "Have no fear that the wife I describe is somewhat more than human, a being to be met with only in Heaven. I shall find her here on earth in five years' time [the time it will take him to train Wilhelmine up to a tolerable spiritual level, as he has explicitly informed her] and hold her in my human arms—I shall not expect of the lily that it attain the cedar's height, nor set for the dove the eagle's goal. I shall not hew a figure out of canvas or apply paint to a block of marble. I have taken the measure of the material before me and know its value. It is an ore that holds pure gold, and what I must do is separate the metal from the rock"; "I respect . . . your boldness not to be ashamed of your own opinion even if it contradicts a famous system of philosophy"; "But there are other ways as well to exercise your intelligence, easily and pleasantly, in searching for parallels. For example, write the following questions on different sheets of paper, and under each the answer as you find it. For example . . . What is *majestic*? A sunrise over the sea, a waterfall, distant mountains, etc. . . . In this way you may sharpen and practice your understanding";

> We drove through a solitary valley, romantically beautiful. . . . Some of the girls are really quite cultivated and interesting. Truly, if I did not have you, and were a rich man, I would say *à dieu à toutes les beautés des villes* [Goodbye to all the beautiful city girls]. I would travel through the mountains, the shadowed valleys especially, looking in at every house, and whenever I found a pair of blue eyes with dark lashes, or brunette curls upon a white neck, I would live there awhile and observe whether the girl were beautiful inwardly as well. If so, and if she had the merest spark of soul in her, I would take her and finish her education in my own way. For this is what I must always do, and if a girl were quite perfect, but already wore her final polish, she would not be the one for me. I myself must form and educate her, and if not, it would be as with the mouthpiece of my clarinet. You can buy these by the dozens at the marketplace, but when you try them, you cannot coax out one pure note. Thus Baer, the musician, once gave me

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one of his own in Potsdam, with the assurance that it was a very good one and that *he* could play well with it. And I do believe that he could. I, however, got nothing out of it but sour, squeaky notes. So I cut a piece for myself from a fresh reed, formed it to my own lips, shaved and scraped away with my knife until it fit my embouchure exactly—and it worked superbly. I played to my heart's content.

Incidentally, while she's between essays, he would like not only to ascertain whether she fits his embouchure but to extract from her, although it goes without saying that he doesn't need it, "the clear assurance that I am loved in return"; plus, because they're scarcely too much to insist on, perfect intimacy and total mutual understanding and a joint bank account: "Does not the joyful knowledge of an exalted and fortunate love breathe through my every line? [Don't answer that question!] And yet, why have you not spoken? And why not put it in writing? . . . And what it comes to is this: I want to make an admission from a completely open heart, no matter what you may think about my self-conceit—namely, that I am *completely convinced* that you love me. But, only God knows what a strange chain of thoughts prompts me to wish to hear it from you. . . . Let us completely unbosom ourselves to each other so that we may at least [!] know each other completely. . . . Tell me openly anything that might displease you about me . . . [and] I shall also work for your own education, Wilhelmine, and to ever more refine and heighten the merits of the girl I love."

Another protracted theme in the letters to Wilhelmine, as well as to his sister Ulrike, is a mysterious journey, which the editor solemnly footnotes as follows:

> Kleist's journey to Würzburg, accompanied by his friend Brockes, is a notorious conundrum. Explanations even include a secret spy mission (he mysteriously consults with Minister Struensee before departure). But it seems clear that the true purpose was surgery for a condition, probably phimosis, that threatened to be an obstruction to his marriage. Thus he may not discuss it freely, even with his sister Ulrike, but might have done so, he tells her, had she been a man. Adult circumcision was a serious operation at the time, and fatal septicemia a real danger.

Phimosis is a "contraction of the orifice of the prepuce, so that it cannot be retracted"; and in virtual proof that phimosis of the whosis is the mostes' diagnosis, one of Kleist's first allusions to the specific unmentionable in a letter to Wilhelmine is as patronizing and vulgar as would be expected from him if such it were: "Help me, dear girl, to carry out my purpose. *Your* happiness is much involved as well as, indeed perhaps more than, my own [because everybody

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knows that women, once they're broken in, need it—excitable little pussycats—ever so much more than men do]. One day you will understand it all." And in letter after letter over months and months he keeps rehearsing without ever explaining this the most boring "mystery" in the entire field of literary studies: "One day I shall explain why I have been writing so late"; "Why, you will ask, why do I thus half express such mystifying thoughts, if I do not wish to make myself absolutely clear?"; "My girl! How happy you will be! And I too! How you will weep on my shoulder, hot heartfelt tears of joy! How you will thank me with all your soul!" But the explanation never comes; and ultimately he jilts her, maybe because at the end of the line it seemed simpler to kiss off than tell. Anyhow, if it's a fact that he was blocked at one orifice he needn't have tried to make up for it by running off interminably at another.

The section of this volume headed "Essays and Journalism" sets out with Kleist's most famous non-fiction piece, "On the Puppet Theater." It's the sort of fancy argument which is liable to look profound if you go along with the author as respectfully as he intends you to and if at the same time you know almost nothing about its subject in the world of material reality. The form of the piece is a dialogue instigated by the author with a professional dancer he has been "surprised" to see in the audience at a makeshift puppet theater in the town marketplace. The dancer "proves" that because puppets are unafflicted by the universal human failing of self-consciousness, and because the mechanism of a puppet allows it to be manipulated with uncompromised "naturalness" from its single "center of gravity," it follows that with a few instructions from the dancer a craftsman could construct a puppet that would dance better than any human dancer:

> "The advantage? First of all, my good friend, a negative one: namely that it would be incapable of affectation. For affectation, as you know, appears when the soul (*vis motrix*) is located at any point other than the center of gravity of a movement. Now because, with his wires and strings, it is this very point and no other that the puppeteer controls, all remaining members are, as they should be, dead, pure pendulums, which follow the basic law of gravity—a marvelous quality, which we look for in vain in most of our dancers. . . .
>
> "In addition . . . these puppets have the advantage of *counter-gravity*. For they know nothing of the inertia of matter, which of all properties is the most obstructive to the dance: for the force that lifts them into the air is greater than that which pulls them to the ground. . . ."

The response to this sort of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't debating-club proposition is that nobody who has ever watched with attention

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and pleasure any dancing at all—by puppets or human beings or circus elephants—would take it seriously for an instant. It's a typical argument in the Erewhon of aesthetics, the study of which—as any undergraduate philosophy major can tell you—precludes and prohibits the experience of anything so impure and misleading as a human performer or an individual work of art. I suppose the Orientalist in the balcony would like to say a word about the Japanese puppet theater or Noh plays or other such immemorially stylized entertainments; but Kleist is arguing that the puppet would dance better than any human dancer because it would dance more *naturally*.

The other items in this section as well as in the section entitled "Anecdotes" are mostly chosen from what Kleist wrote for the short-lived daily newspaper (Berlin's first) that he founded and edited. They are brief but not always unpretentious, and often not out of the range of think-pieces produced daily by much more recent newspaper philosophers: "Reflection, or thinking something over, finds its proper moment *after* rather than *before* an act. If it comes into play prior to it, or in the very moment of decision, it seems only to confuse, to obstruct and to repress the power to act, which flows from the glorious wellspring of our feelings" (so that, if you're in the business of hiring soldiers or assassins, a cross between a cocktail-lounge crooner and a dancing puppet would be a better bet than Spinoza). "On the Gradual Fabrication of Thoughts While Speaking" is the shrewdest of them, moving from "l'appétit vient en mangeant" (the appetite comes by eating) to "l'idée vient en parlant" (the idea comes by speaking): i.e. the mere act of speaking makes possible the appearance and development of an idea that hasn't yet taken shape and might otherwise never even appear—

> I am convinced that many a great speaker, in that moment of opening his mouth to speak, has been unsure of what he was about to say. But trusting the circumstances to provide both the right line of ideas and the necessary mental stimulation, he is encouraged to risk a beginning. I think of that "thunderbolt" of Mirabeau's with which he disposed of the King's Master of Ceremonies after the dismissal of the last monarchical session on that fateful June twenty-third. The King having enjoined the estates to adjourn, his Master of Ceremonies later returned to the hall to find the members still present, and asked them if they had not heard the royal command.
>
> "Yes," answered Mirabeau, "we have heard the King's command. . . ." I am certain that he made this affable start without the faintest prescience of the bayonet thrust with which he was to conclude.
>
> "Yes, Monsieur," he repeats, "we have heard it. . . ." Clearly he still has no idea of what he is about.

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> "But by what right," he continues, whereupon a fresh source of stupendous ideas opens up to him, "do you proclaim commands to us? We are the representatives of the Nation!" This is exactly what he needs, and leaping to the pinnacle of audacity, he cries, "The Nation *issues* commands. It does not *receive* them. And to make myself absolutely clear to you"—only now does he hit on the words that express the total opposition for which his soul stands armed—"you may tell your King that we will not leave our places except at the point of the bayonet."

There are also in the letters two issues that, though they can hardly be ignored, I don't consider as important as we're all supposed to. The first is the one the editor calls "perhaps the most notorious emotional crisis in German literary history. . . . Kant had exposed the presumption of mixing earthly knowledge with metaphysics, and this Kleist accepted readily. But suddenly it was clear that Kant had shown the uncertainty of our knowledge even of earthly things, or so Kleist read him. The mind imposes its own categories on the experienced world. It is, as Kleist tries to explain to his fiancée, as though we wore colored glasses and attributed their color to what we saw. It is all, in short, a terrible deception":

> Since coming to the realization in my soul the Truth is nowhere to be known here on earth [Kleist writes to Wilhelmine] I have not touched another book. I have paced idly in my room, I have sat by the open window, I have run from the house, an inner unrest at last drove me to taverns and coffee houses, I have gone to plays and concerts for distraction, and, to find some relief, I have even committed a folly [the editor guesses "an experiment with drugs" or "the planning of the suicide attempt described by" a friend of Kleist's] which I would rather you learned about from Carl [her brother]; and still my one thought, which my soul, with this tumult all around it, kept laboring with burning anxiety, was this: your *only*, your *highest* goal has sunk from sight.
>
> One morning I tried forcing myself to work, but an inward nausea overwhelmed my will. I felt an indescribable longing to weep on your neck, or at least to press some friend to my breast. . . .

(Kleist seems to have felt this last but not least urge much more intensely as the years passed. Three years after his break with Wilhelmine, he wrote Ernst von Pfuel to remind him

> How we flew into each other's arms in Dresden last year! How immense the world that, like a track, opened to our senses, thrilling us with eagerness for the race! And now we lie fallen across each other, and can only gaze toward our distant goal, which nev-

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> er glittered more brightly than now, beclouded though we are in the dust of our fall. The fault is all mine, mine alone, and it is I who have so misguided you. Ah, I cannot say this as I feel it.—What can I do with all my tears, Ernst? I wish that I, to pass the time, like that naked King Richard, might fret us a grave as they drop, minute by minute, to bury within it both you and myself and our infinite pain. Never will we embrace like that again! . . .

And just a few months farther along, O faithless heart! he wrote to Otto August Rühle von Lilienstern—Jawohl!—that "an *epistolary friendship* is not for us, and only insofar as you feel for me some of the longing that I feel for you, which is to say, for the most ardent embracing of you with all my senses, both of soul and of body, can I feel myself moved a little by your handwriting as though in gentle embrace.")

Maybe it was literally and at the moment of truth Kant whose veil of unknowing drove Kleist to a nervous breakdown or thereabouts; but, when an exceptionally intelligent and well read man still believes by the age of twenty-three that full knowledge and perfect understanding and idyllic happiness can be achieved through reading books and studying nature and teaching a nice girl to become his voluntary slave, he is the very model of an accident waiting to happen, he will sooner rather than later pick up the fatal book (Kant or Hume or Montaigne) and begin kicking and screaming and sending out mailgrams in all directions soliciting candidates to press to his breast.

The second big brute of a bogus issue is Kleist's suicide and the letters he wrote just preceding it. The fact is he had been talking suicide from his youth, and he made at least several unsuccessful efforts over the years to persuade friends or relatives to come along for the ride, among them his cousin by marriage, Marie von Kleist, to whom he addressed three of the "suicide letters":

> My dear Marie, if you knew how death and love took turns crowning these last moments of my life with blossoms, those of Heaven, and those of earth, surely you would be willing to let me die. I assure you, I am wholly joyous. Mornings and evenings I kneel down, something I could never do before, and I pray to God. For this my life, the most tormented of any that anyone has ever lived, I can now at last thank Him, since He makes it good through the most glorious and sensual of deaths. O if only there were something I could do to assuage the bitter pain that I shall cause you. There was a moment when I decided to have a portrait painted; but then it seemed to me again that I have done you too much wrong ever to be able to expect that my picture would give you much pleasure. Can it console you to hear that I would never have exchanged you for this woman if she had want-

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> ed nothing more than to live with me? Really, my dearest Marie, it is so. There have been moments when with an open heart I spoke these words to my dear friend. O I assure you, I love you so, you are so exceedingly dear and precious to me, that I can hardly say that I love this dear, this divine friend more than you. The decision that she came to in her soul, to die with me, drew me, I cannot tell you with what inexpressible and irresistible force, to her breast. Do you not recall that I many times asked you if you would die with me?—But you always answered no—A tumult of joyousness, never experienced before, gripped me, and I cannot conceal from you that her grave is more precious to me than the beds of all the empresses of this world.—Ah, my dear friend, may God soon call you to that better world where we all, loving with the love of angels, will press each other to our hearts.—Adieu.

And one of the letters is to "this woman," Henriette Vogel ("terminally ill with cancer"), his accomplice and victim:

> my dear heart, my beloved, my dove, my life, my dear sweet life, light of my life, my all, my estate and effects, my castles, acres, meadows and vineyards, O sun of my life, sun, moon and stars, heaven and earth, my past and my future, my bride, my girl, my dear friend, my innermost being, my heart's blood, my viscera, apple of my eye, O, dearest, how shall I name you? My golden child, my pearl, my gem, my crown, my queen and empress. Dearly beloved of my heart, my highest and most cherished, my each and all, my wife, my wedding, christening of my children, my tragic drama, my posthumous fame! Ah, you are my other, better self, my virtues, my merits, my hope, the forgiveness of my sins, my future and blessedness. O, dear daughter of Heaven, my child of God, my interceder, my spokesman and pleader, my guardian angel, my Cherubim and Seraph, how I love you!

He could have used a keeper if not a guardian angel, because when he wasn't the Recording Angel of his stories he was an accident waiting to happen; but, even so, I doubt that he really needed to wait around till he turned up somebody he could talk into taking the first bullet.

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DONALD E. STANFORD

The Best of Bynner

A COMPREHENSIVE SELECTION of the work of Witter Bynner (1881–1968), once a well-known poet and man of letters, now almost forgotten, has been brought together in this beautifully designed, illustrated, and impeccably printed five-volume uniform set[1] with introductions by James Kraft, Richard Wilbur, William Jay Smith and others. It is now possible to attempt an informed assessment of Bynner's achievements.

Witter Bynner was a wealthy man with a connoisseur's taste for Chinese objets d'art, many of which were on display in his Santa Fe home (now the property of St. John's College) at the corner of Buena Vista and College Streets, where he lived from 1922 until his death. He believed in Whitman's democratic America, and *Leaves of Grass* was one of his two favorite books—the other being the *Letters of George Meredith*. He was a life-long liberal, a strong supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, of civil rights for blacks, and of the women's suffrage movement. There is a picture of Bynner and John Dewey taken May 6, 1911, leading a parade for women's suffrage down Fifth Avenue. Of Calvin Coolidge he said, "His disregard of the ordinary citizen's welfare is implacable, whole-souled and complete." His political and social views were directly expressed in his poems. Here is "Defeat" which I quote entire:

> On a train in Texas German prisoners eat
> With white American soldiers, seat by seat,
> While black American soldiers sip apart,
> The white men eating meat, the black men heart.
> Now, with that other war a century done,
> Not the live North but the dead South has won,
> Not yet a riven nation comes awake.
> Whom are we fighting this time, for God's sake?

[1] THE WORKS OF WITTER BYNNER, general editor, *James Kraft*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Vol. 1: SELECTED POEMS, edited and with a critical introduction by *Richard Wilbur*; biographical introduction by *James Kraft*. $20.00. Vol. 2: LIGHT VERSE AND SATIRES, edited and with an introduction by *William Jay Smith*. $20.00. Vol. 3: THE CHINESE TRANSLATIONS: THE JADE MOUNTAIN, introduction by *Burton Watson*; THE WAY OF LIFE ACCORDING TO LAOTZU, introduction by *David Lattimore*. $20.00. Vol. 4: PROSE PIECES, edited and with an introduction by *James Kraft*. $25.00. Vol. 5: SELECTED LETTERS, edited and with an introduction by *James Kraft*. $30.00.

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Mark well the token of the separate seat.
It is again ourselves whom we defeat.

The establishment considered him a maverick. They found this Harvard graduate's wealth, intellect, cultured tastes, democratic behavior and ethnic and social views an incomprehensible mélange, and so they readily believed the myth that Bynner was the illegitimate son of Walt Whitman and that there were blacks in his ancestry. He took the grand tour of Europe in 1902 at the age of twenty-one, but he didn't return there for almost fifty years. He felt America superior to Europe. He liked and admired the Orientals, especially the Chinese. He lived in China for two years. He had a home in Mexico as well as in Santa Fe, and he was a close observer and student of American Indian culture.

He was throughout his life, so long as his health permitted, gregarious, social and high-spirited, a *determined* hedonist, a vibrant figure in the intellectual and aesthetic turmoil of Santa Fe. In his student days at Harvard he and Wallace Stevens and others engaged in rowdy behavior at Rammy's restaurant. There was a mock rape of a waitress. According to James Kraft in his admirable biographical introduction to the first volume of *The Works of Witter Bynner*, the affair may have been one of the causes of Stevens' early departure (without a degree) from Harvard. Partying with Bynner was not without risk. In Santa Fe in 1935 he poured a mug of beer over the head of Robert Frost. But as a general rule he was a welcome guest and a generous host. A list of the names of his friends is a roll call of the notorious and famous: Cecil B. de Mille, Clara Bow, O. Henry, Isadora Duncan, Jack London, Aldous Huxley, Edith Sitwell, Igor Stravinsky, Norman Douglas, Ezra Pound (for whose early poems he secured publication in America), George Santayana, William Rose Benét, Alfred Knopf, Edna St. Vincent Millay (to whom he was briefly engaged), D. H. and Frieda Lawrence, Arthur Davison Ficke, Countee Cullen—but a complete list would take several pages.

He had a conservative bent as far as his own poetry was concerned. Nevertheless he could not avoid some influence of the revolutionary movements of the 1910s and 1920s. His poetry (eighteen volumes in all) is a compromise between the experimentalists and the traditionalists. He had an initial admiration for the early works of Pound before he became disillusioned with the Imagists, and he wrote a number of poems in free verse at the same time he was writing poems in the iambic line. He published a collection of sonnets entitled *Guest House*. He had great enthusiasm for A. E. Housman from very early in his own career and his early verse was praised by E. A. Robinson. His important achievements as a translator included translations of the French poet Charles Vidrac, two highly successful volumes of poetry from the Chinese—*The Jade Mountain* and *The Way of Life According to Laotzu*—and Euripides'

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Iphigenia in Tauris. As a critic his most important achievement was the rediscovery of the forgotten New England poet Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, whose selected sonnets he published in 1931. He was an excellent writer of the informal essay, notably in "A Word or Two with Henry James" and "A Young Visit with George Meredith."

"I got caught the other day in James' verbal vortex," wrote Bynner to Arthur Davison Ficke in 1905. The result was his report of the "interview"—"A Word or Two with Henry James"—which consists of an introductory sentence and then a long monologue by James as Bynner remembered it after James's departure. It is impossible to be sure of the accuracy of Bynner's memory, but he certainly caught the tone and texture of James's late style—as he did in a letter written to James in 1904 in which he imitates the verbosity of the Master.

His reminiscences of his friends Willa Cather, Ezra Pound, D. H. and Frieda Lawrence, Edgar Lee Masters, O. Henry, Lincoln Steffens, Alice Corbin Henderson, and others are also a contribution to the cultural history of the period.

Richard Wilbur has made a good selection of Bynner's original verse for Volume One of the *Works* and has provided a valuable critical introduction, impartial and objective in its evaluation of Bynner's strengths and weaknesses. He is (at his best) the poet of the quiet, simple mood or tone poem, completely apprehensible in one reading. When he attempts to be complex or profound or allegorical (as in *Eden Tree*) his style becomes clotted, rhetorical, and confused.

As Wilbur points out, the simple lyric went out of fashion from about 1930 on. Taste was dominated by those university intellectuals who demanded that contemporary poetry be imagistic and allusive in the manner of Pound's *Cantos* or complex and ironic in the manner of Eliot's "Sweeney among the Nightingales" and *The Waste Land*. Young university instructors had a vested interest in Pound, Eliot and their followers. They could augment their bibliographies by tracking down their obscure allusions and concealed quotations and by providing complicated explications of each of their many ambivalent passages. The relatively simple lyrics or short poems of Housman, Bridges, Elizabeth Daryush and others, including Bynner, were neglected and forgotten. Bynner's tone poem, "From Sea"—minor, but quiet and moving—was just one of the many casualties left on the field of battle after the revolution!

Clear as a leaf of fern
Against a crystal sky,
Over the trailing stern
Hovers a butterfly.

Half-seen to southward sink

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Sails that only now
Began, at the northern brink,
Half-seen to lift their bow.

Westward a fishing-fleet
Is anchored, dark of hull,
Eastward, in retreat,
Circles a single gull.

Not anywhere is land,
But under a soft sun
Peace is near at hand,
Simple and vast and one.

There are others just as good or better in Wilbur's selection, including "An Old Elegy," "The Dead Loon," "Rose Time," "In Kamakura," "O Hunted Huntress," and "Meadow-Shoes." "O Hunted Huntress" describes a white fawn being chased by a huntress who in turn is pursued by a black boar. The symbolism is a bit too obvious, yet rhythm and tone are nicely managed. I quote the final four lines:

Look toward the fawn, the flashing white,
Hope not to flee but to pursue,
Before the onset of the night—
Before the fawn shall blacken too.

One of his best short poems is "Meadow-Shoes," which needs no comment:

My shoe-soles, wet in the meadow,
Sang like the chirrup of birds—
But like birds of only a note or two,
Like persons of few words.

And, O my shoes, how hard it is
To tell the joy you touch!
I know, for I have tried to sing
The things I love too much.

In a letter of June, 1908, sent from a remote camp in Maine where he had gone with Cecil B. de Mille to compose a play, Bynner wrote "I am alone in the cabin this gusty night. . . . There's a dead loon in camp, shot by a clever fool, and down the lake a live loon, calling." The incident inspired "The Dead Loon" which ends:

That dead loon is farther on the way than we are.
It has no voice, where it hangs nailed to the gate.
But it is with me now and with the evening star.
Its voice is my voice and its fate my fate.

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Bynner was a witty man in conversation and in print too, as is abundantly evident in Volume Two of the *Works, Light Verse and Satires*, which presents all of *Spectra* together with a selection of the later "Spectric" poems, all of *Cake*, and one-third each of the volumes entitled *Pins for Wings*, *Guest Book*, and *New Poems 1960*—as well as selected verse from books and magazines over a period of fifty years. The selection is introduced by William Jay Smith, author of *The Spectra Hoax*, 1961.

Bynner was viewing the Imagists with increasing irritation and distaste when he commented in *The Little Review*, August, 1915: "These people wring tiny beauties dry. . . . On the whole, the Imagists strike me as being purveyors of more or less potent cosmetics, their whole interest being in the cosmetic itself, not even in its application." A few months later, in February, 1916, Bynner and his close friend from Harvard days, Arthur Davison Ficke, were in Chicago conspiring to commit the now famous Spectra hoax, a parody of the Imagist, Vorticist, and Futurist schools. Bynner became Emanuel Morgan, a name suggested by "I Hear Emmanuel Singing." Ficke took the persona of Anne Knish, a name suggested by Jewish pastries called knishes. Smith records in his Introduction that Spectra was completed in ten days with the aid of ten quarts of Scotch. The volume was quickly accepted and immediately published with astounding results. It was seriously and warmly praised by Edgar Lee Masters, John Gould Fletcher, and Eunice Tietjens of *Poetry*. The prestigious magazine *Others* devoted an entire issue to the dazzling new movement. Spectric poems were accepted for publication by *The Little Review* and *Poetry*, and the editors of the *New Republic* commissioned Bynner to write a review. According to Smith, Alfred Kreymborg claimed that friends of his had met the beautiful Anne Knish, and Ficke himself was told by a Brigadier General in France that he, the General, was Anne Knish. The hoax came to an end in April 1918 when Bynner publicly admitted the true identity of the hoaxers. A few abashed critics ran for cover but Alfred Kreymborg persisted in his opinion that Morgan and Knish wrote better poems than Ficke and Bynner. Even Harriet Monroe who, after the exposure, refused to print the Morgan poems she had accepted, quoted with approval Arthur Eddy's comment that the Spectric poems were delightful revelations of the real Bynner and the real Ficke. The movement did not die immediately from public exposure. *Pins for Wings* appeared under the name Emanuel Morgan in 1920, and Emanuel Morgan continued to publish Spectric poems in the magazines. "Posthumous Poems of Emanuel Morgan" appeared in 1927 with the epigraph "On hearing from Budapest of the death of Anne Knish from an obscure disease, Emanuel Morgan committed suicide at a sanitarium in Pittsburgh."

Cake, Bynner's brilliant satirical verse play, was completed June 26, 1926, and published in the fall of that year. Smith discusses the marked similarities between *Cake* and Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*, the first fragment of which appeared in Eliot's *Criterion* for October

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1926 and the second fragment in January 1927. Twenty years later came Eliot's *Cocktail Party* with further similarities to *Cake* too obvious to be accidental. Of one of these Smith remarks, "I dare say that *Cake* and *The Cocktail Party* are the only two modern verse dramas—or dramas of any sort for that matter—in which a society woman meets her death in a remote place beside an ant hill." Smith does not belabor the point, but in my opinion *Cake* must be considered a source of Eliot's play.

Cake is a cleverly written verse play in four acts satirizing American culture of the twenties—permissive sex, materialism, alcoholism, gourmandizing, expatriation (the Lady goes to Paris instead of heaven), psychoanalysis, Freud, bobbed hair, the search for eternal youth, literary fads, religious fads, desperate hedonism, Baudelairean ennui, jazz, etc. The protagonist, called simply the Lady, indulges in pretentious behavior which bears a resemblance to Mabel Dodge Luhan, Bynner's friend in Taos, who was not so friendly after she read the play. As the curtain rises she is seated on her throne, a gilded eagle. She wears a coronet of golden eagles. On each side of the throne are low chairs supported by dollar signs couchant. In one of them sits the Unicorn (her Chamberlain who directs the action) reading a newspaper. "Everything about the Lady and her court is overdone." The Lady speaks the opening line: "The trouble with me is I'm bored with being bored." In the succeeding four acts the Lady who has already gone through seven husbands as well as "mysticism, free love and drink" continues her search for Experience, temporarily ending with her death on an ant hill in India. She is revived by glandular transfusion to a life-in-death existence. At the final curtain she marries her cake-servant. The play has been produced several times, notably in Pasadena and San Francisco. Although definitely a period piece, it would probably go well on the little theater stage today.

Bynner's mastery of the sonnet was turned to good use in his satirical poems. All of the sonnets in *Guest Book* are competently written, slightly malicious portraits of friends and acquaintances. An annotated edition which identifies each "guest" would be helpful. The volume was published in 1935 and at this late date we can only guess the identities of the victims. Reading them is like looking at a book of Max Beerbohm caricatures unidentified and unknown to the reader. "Wormwood" is a neat ironic profile of a genealogical lady obsessed by the importance of her ancestors, who are a frequent subject of her conversation. The final lines read:

> She enters with a rustle of old bones,
> Not hers nor anyone's; for out of place,
> Denied their honest quiet under stones,
> The dead go yet unburied in her face.
> They haunt her gestures dankly with concern
> And punctuate her speech with periods

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Of chilly pause and make her every turn
Seem like a wormy motion under sods.
If only she would lay her down and die,
The dead might be at peace and so might I.

It is not difficult to guess that Mabel Dodge Luhan is the subject of "Gourmande"—

Her appetites are empty after all.
Though she is fed and surfeited and fat,
She does her best to drink a waterfall—
Not that she wants the water for a minute,
But she thinks she had better be round it than be in it.

The satirical vein is to be found in volumes other than *Guest Book*. *Pins for Wings* provides memorable glimpses of literary personalities. Here are two:

T. S. Eliot
the wedding cake
of two tired cultures

Harriet Monroe
the Mother Superior
considers lingerie

And in *Deathless Laughers, the Forgotten Gods* there is a parody of the Pound poems of the *Lustra* period:

I Evade

The look in your eyes
Was as soft as the underside of soap in a soap dish . . .
And I left before you could love me.

Bynner wrote to his friend Arthur Davison Ficke:

> I know that there is in the finest poetry of Asia a beauty far surpassing the poetry of Europe. . . . English and American poetry seem to me child's-play compared with the severe beauty of the Chinese.

His enthusiasm for the Orient and all things Oriental led him twice to China, first in 1917 and again in 1920–21, and to the translation of two volumes of Chinese verse, *The Jade Mountain* (1929), an anthology of the poetry of the T'ang Dynasty (A.D. 618–906), and *The Way of Life According to Laotzu* (1944), a philosophical poem derived from the sayings of Laotzu in the sixth century B.C. Bynner did not know Chinese and for the first of these volumes he relied on his

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friend Dr. Kiang Kang-hu for the literal translations and interpretations. Dr. Kiang was not available for the second volume (he was in a Japanese prison in occupied China) and Bynner was forced to use a dozen or so English versions of the *Laotzu*. In addition, there are several notable essays on China and its culture in Volume Four of the *Works*: *Prose Pieces*, including "Do We Know the Chinese?," in which Bynner asserts that the Chinese are fundamentally a democratic people, and "The Chinese Brush," a well-written essay on the beauties of Chinese calligraphy. In "Tempest in a China Teapot" he condemns Amy Lowell and Florence Ayscough's *Fir-Flower Tablets*, translations of Chinese poetry in which (according to Bynner) the root significance of Chinese ideographs is overstressed, as it is, although Bynner doesn't say so, in Ezra Pound's version of Fenollosa's ideographic method.

Bynner's reputation as a translator must stand or fall on the merits of *The Jade Mountain*, the anthology compiled by Sun Chu in the eighteenth century consisting of about 300 poems of the T'ang Dynasty selected from about 49,000 extant poems. The volume was successful commercially and critically. Pound had prepared the way with his now famous *Cathay* (1915), which featured poems by Li Po, who also appears in *The Jade Mountain*.

In his Introduction Bynner explains his enthusiasm for Chinese poetry from which he received "a new, finer, and deeper education than ever came to me from the Hebrew or the Greeks" for it reflects "a profoundly rich civilization, a more poised and particularized civilization than we Westerners have yet attained." The best of the T'ang poems, especially those by Li Po, "bring the true, the beautiful, the everlasting into simple easy touch with the human, homely, and the immediate." One of my favorites is "On Hearing Chün the Buddhist Monk from Shu Play His Lute":

> The monk from Shu with his green silk lute-case,
> Walking west down O-mêi Mountain,
> Has brought me by one touch of the strings
> The breath of pines in a thousand valleys.
> I hear him in the cleansing brook,
> I hear him in the icy bells;
> And I feel no change though the mountain darkens
> And cloudy autumn heaps the sky.

The beauty of art informs and beautifies nature. *The Jade Mountain* has many such moments. How good is Bynner compared to his chief rival, Ezra Pound? It is instructive to compare Bynner's version of "A Song of Ch'ang-kan" by Li Po with Pound's version, which Pound entitled "The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter." The poems are too long to quote in their entirety. Bynner's version begins:

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My hair had hardly covered my forehead.
I was picking flowers, playing by my door,
When you, my lover, on a bamboo horse,
Came trotting in circles and throwing green plums.

Pound's translation reads:

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

Pound's version seems to me to be the more effective, especially the first line. His diction is simpler, more precise and direct, more in the character of a young girl. Here are two more passages.

Bynner:

But at fifteen I straightened my brows and laughed,
Learning that no dust could ever seal our love,
That even unto death I would await you by my post
And would never lose heart in the tower of silent watching.

Pound:

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

Again Pound's version is the more moving, but Bynner's rendition, according to Dr. Kiang, is closer to the original, especially line fourteen which Pound renders "Why should I climb the look out?" Bynner has it "And would never lose heart in the tower of silent watching." This is a reference to the legend of a wife who built a tower in the top of which she lived, her gaze ever fixed towards the mountain and her hermit husband who had abandoned her. The sense of Pound's translation appears to be the opposite of the intention of Li Po. Li Po's "Exile's Letter," one of the greatest of Pound's translations, is not in *The Jade Mountain*, but I doubt that Bynner could have done better. He cannot come close to Pound as a stylist, but with the aid of his scholarly collaborator, his translations are probably closer to the original than Pound's. They are pleasant reading and a contribution to our knowledge of Chinese culture.

The Way of Life According to Laotzu (1944) had an even greater popular success than *The Jade Mountain*, although *The Way* was available in more than forty other English translations and in countless renditions in other languages—but, says David Lattimore in his

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Introduction, "Bynner's [version] alone is the creation of a distinguished original poet in English." Bynner worked from 1943 to 1944 in his home in Chapula, Mexico, composing his translation without the help of his old friend Dr. Kiang. (However, he sent a copy of his manuscript in 1944 to Kiang in prison, and four years later approval arrived. Kiang remained in jail, even after the Communists took over from the Japanese. He died there of malnutrition in 1954.) Bynner (who was still ignorant of Chinese) used a number of English translations in composing his version, which according to Lattimore contains some of Bynner's best poetry. According to Arthur Waley much of it is "flat, easy and smooth" and he found much in Bynner's version that is not in the original. The style reminds me of Pound's Cantos on Confucius except that Pound is frequently the more vigorous and incisive writer. In his Introduction Bynner defines Laotzu's *Way* as "creative quietism" and he says that Laotzu teaches "a common-sense so profound in its simplicity that it has come to be called mysticism." My response to the poem is the same as Waley's and I cannot understand its popularity although there are a few refreshing moments such as

> He who feels punctured
> Must once have been a bubble

and this advice to a victorious general:

> The death of a multitude is cause for mourning:
> Conduct your triumph as a funeral.

The concluding volume of the *Works*, comprised of Bynner's chatty, well-written letters selected by James Kraft from the 7000 extant in the Houghton library and fully documented by him, is a valuable source book for Bynner's life and period. He frequently asked his correspondents to save and return his letters to fill up gaps in his diary. There is one stunning surprise—a letter written to Barry Faulkner from North Carolina in 1904 when Bynner was twenty-three years old. It is full of racial malice. Years later, Bynner was "born again" and became a strong supporter of civil rights for blacks.

Witter Bynner was a minor poet who wrote too much verse—"all sorts of poems," as Richard Wilbur put it—but his best lyrics may return to the anthologies. His light verse and satires are dated but still amusing, and his essays though somewhat journalistic are well-written and informative. *The Jade Mountain* has a permanent place in the literature of translation. As an outspoken liberal with influence, he did his bit in the battle for civil rights for blacks and for the equality of the sexes.

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VERNON YOUNG

Poetry Chronicle: Some Others and the Irish

WE ARE SO ACCUSTOMED to the poem as urgent reflection of a social condition that harries us or of some part of the personality which is unresolved, angry or deprived, that a special effort is required to read poems as artifacts with no explicit reference, save an occasional alien simile, to the world in which we apprehensively live. The leading preoccupation of Ivan Lalic's poetry[1] is an essentially Platonic rehearsal of the Classical and Byzantine past in the eastern Mediterranean, especially of those countries now called Yugoslavia (Lalic is Serbian): a rehearsal that consists of pinpointed moments, frequently lyrical monologues by voices from the dead, in which the past has already become the ruins of its future. Several of his poems end in this manner:

> We are the last. If we fall asleep here beneath the towers
> Who will wake us? The fires are burning low.
> The citadel is on the right bank, and the wind on the left.
>
> Do not look back: there is nothing outside you,
> Space is only time visible in a different way.
> Places we love we can never leave.
>
> To state the danger, but to remain
> True to the visible: that is the real lesson;
> I recite it into the wind as it blows from the future,
> Bearing the flakes of my ashes
> And your voices.

The resulting sensation is that of a disembodied communion in which it is hard to say whether Lalic is being retrospective or prophetic. Under the aspect of history, for the European at least, to be retrospective is to be prophetic at the same time. The question is: when does a poem earn the right to be construed as facing both ways? And how much immediacy is a poet willing to sacrifice when he prefers the enigmatic to the corporeal? Lalic time and again cele-

[1] THE WORKS OF LOVE: Selected Poems, by *Ivan V. Lalic*. Trans. by *Francis R. Jones*. Anvil Press Poetry. $6.50p.

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brates continuity in what remains after all we cherish has vanished: his "works of love" are the grass that grows over the battlefield and the birds that scream after the wall has crumbled and the garden has run riot. In "Young Woman from Pompeii," his speaker, the young woman herself, asks, "how can I tell you that there exists / A domain where I am more real than the voice / Trying to imprison me, more solid / Than the light in which you look at me?" It is precisely the domain more real, the light more solid, which is left out of Lalic's soliloquies. I like to feel that a poet's sense of the past has in some measure been stirred by his sense of the present; reading Lalic I find scant inference that the present exists for him (as a poet!). His poems seem to have arisen in a continuum of essence, uncontaminated by passions or allegiances or even by personalities, except in the role of phantoms. In all fairness I should point out that translation can be a treacherous ally of the poet. From what I remember of Lalic's work ten years ago, he has enriched his tapestry of images; yet it is conceivable that Mr. Jones, while conveying the imagery, has in some way failed to maintain the connective tissue that might enliven the ambiguity I have complained of. I do not have on hand the previous versions for comparison, but my ear remembers that Charles Simic translated the earlier poems with a finer regard for their sensuous inflections.

To the youngest of my readers, Roy Campbell[2] is probably an unfamiliar name. Campbell enjoyed a *succès de scandale*, right of center, during the years when Eliot, then Auden and, more meteorically, Dylan Thomas were the key names in transatlantic poetry. Campbell was on the margin of notoriety for many reasons; for these, foremost: he was the only British poet (as far as I know) who favored the Falange in the Spanish Civil War; his verse was impenitently romantic when not obsessively vindictive (and pointedly hostile to those he called "leftist intellectuals")—and his poems *rhymed relentlessly*! Peter Alexander, with a respect for Campbell decently this side of idolatry, has written a critical biography which Oxford has published simultaneously with these *Selected Poems*, for which Alexander has prepared an enlightening introduction. Campbell was something too much of a compulsive exile, feeling no less alienated in the Oxford setting to which he had fled from his native South Africa than he had felt in Africa except when idealizing its primitive aspects. His earliest verse, between 1916 and 1925, is fairly described by Alexander as "image-choked" and "over-energetic," reflecting, no doubt, the alarums and excursions of his itineraries in those years: rejecting Oxford, tramping in southern France, living in "a converted cow-shed in Wales" with a beautiful wife who subsequently provoked his bent for scathing satire by having an affair with Vita Sackville-West. Subsequently he lived in France and

[2] THE SELECTED POEMS OF ROY CAMPBELL, ed. with an Introduction by *Peter Alexander*. Oxford University Press. $11.95.

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Spain, became a convert to Catholicism and, after the fall of Toledo, to the Nationalist cause—and at various junctures was a British secret agent, commando-for-a-month in Wingate's force and, when disabled, a submarine-watcher. Post-War he worked for the BBC, lectured in Spain and North America, moved to Portugal in 1952, where he lived until his death in a car crash, 1957.

His poetry is well worth a reappraisal. Unless you are dead set against the tune and tone of Alexander Pope in the twentieth century, you'll have to acknowledge that a personality comes off the page at you in verse which, even where it is tactless, politically dubious or flavored with paranoia, is seldom deficient in crucifying metaphors and salubrious insult. His "Creeping Jesus" (an attack on William Plomer) is perhaps unsurpassed in the hate-poetry of our time, even by D. H. L. Here are eight lines of a comparable sixty!

> Pale crafty eyes beneath his ginger crop,
> A fox's snout with spectacles on top—
> Eye to the keyhole, kneeling on the stair,
> We often found this latter saint in prayer,
> 'For your own sake' he'd tell you with a sigh
> (He always did his kindness on the sly).
> He paid mere friendship with his good advice
> And swarmed with counsels as a cur with lice. . . .

His other most powerful vein was in poems that evoked the wild animals of Africa and none, I think, is more stunningly beautiful than his sonnet, *The Zebras.*

> From the dark woods that breathe of fallen showers,
> Harnessed with level rays in golden reins,
> The zebras draw the dawn across the plains
> Wading knee-deep among the scarlet flowers.
> The sunlight, zithering their flanks with fire,
> Flashes between the shadows as they pass
> Barred with electric tremors through the grass
> Like wind along the gold strings of a lyre.
>
> Into the flushed air snorting plumes
> That smoulder round their feet in drifting fumes,
> With dove-like voices call the distant fillies,
> While round the herds the stallion wheels his flight,
> Engine of beauty volted with delight,
> To roll his mare among the trampled lilies.

Not until the mid-thirties did his resources for original verse begin to fray out, whereupon he turned increasingly to translation, producing notable paraphrases of St. John of the Cross, of Lorca and

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of, above all, Baudelaire which, if he had written nothing of his own, would memorialize him for years to come. It is instructive to compare his rhymed Baudelaire (a few are in the *Selected Poems*) with the recent free-verse treatment of Richard Howard. All you can learn of Baudelaire from Howard are his themes and an occasional proximate image. Campbell's Baudelaire brings you the *Parnassian* in English poems which are at the same time self-sufficiently musical.

No verse I might have deliberately hunted could more purely represent the opposite of Campbell's voluptuous couplets than the Yankee poems of Bruce Guernsey.[3] As the poet himself says, "Winter is a way of life in New Hampshire, not just a season; it is a metaphor one must survive." Guernsey will survive his and they will survive, I trust, this introduction to them in an auspicious first volume. Guernsey draws a maximum of suggestion from the dry, spare emblems of the provincial landscape and the provincial pastime: the well, the chopping block, the swamp, the apple, the chicken coop and the snowball. These poems are minimal to the eye only. Guernsey's method is to focus on the character of an elemental object until he invests it with associations that enlarge it, you might say historicize it: a chopping block, "In its center, a stain / the dark core of maple / knot of blood, / a little twist of pain," becomes the pillow for a beheaded emperor, a shelf of thumbs from centuries of thieves, a setting for the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham—and these in a few terse lines. With as few well-chosen words he divines the menace inseparable from charm (as in "Back Road" and "The Affair") or the terror beyond the circle of light ("Mug Shot"). I hope this poet will encourage his personal taste for American Gothic—that hint and embodiment of presences, invisible but sentient, there beside you: the lost fisherman ("his white eyes are watching"), the unseen howling dog who may or may not exist, the snowman who "taps his cane on the window, / a signal to your wife / who climbs down the ladder. . . ." Guernsey is a spook, warming his hands over a spit-stove.

Where We Live[4] is also a "first" and Peter Makuck is also a New Englander. While his poems are shaped less rigorously than Guernsey's, they are aimed at a different order of suggestiveness and at states of mind more sombre; they are vehicles of self-searching; they register illuminations come too late or memories of places, people, moments which have afflicted the poet with mixed feelings of love, contained misery—and wonder. Louis Simpson (in the Introduction) finds his language "intimate, exact, colorful." I find it reticent, idiosyncratic, mottled, and sometimes, problematical.

[3] JANUARY THAW, by *Bruce Guernsey*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $10.95; $4.95.

[4] WHERE WE LIVE, by *Peter Makuck*. Boa Editions. $10.00; $5.00.

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These are the last three stanzas of eight, from "Along the Phoenix Canals"—i.e. Phoenix, Arizona:

> Dogs, junkyard fierce, bark in the patios
> Hidden behind high walls that are bright
> With firethorn dripping its red on white. Dogs.
>
> The footfalls set them off—a kind of progress
> Changing voice from house to house
> Where pool-light trembles on the inside walls.
>
> These mild winter mornings, they rise
> Early: odd fowl, they beat along the banks
> Flopping their arms as if trying to fly from
> Reflection, high above the walls of their homes.

These lines gave me a bad time. In the final stanza, *they* is eventually traceable to "joggers," six stanzas back, but in the same stanza *odd fowl* is so close to "they / rise early" and in the last line "Reflection, high above the walls" is so confounding (did he mean thoughts or mirrored images?) that my conclusions about the poem were to say the least infirm! This indirection is not habitual in Makuck's poems but in a less extreme form it often tends to keep his intentions at a distance. Where he is *un*ambiguous he can be disconcertingly naive, solemnly convinced that we are all assassins, involved without pardon in the machinery of extermination. His poem, "Meat," concentrated with *exact* speech, that's for certain, on the "disassembly line" in a slaughter-house, is designed to achieve at the end an effect of wounding irony but long before then the familiar strategy has been exposed and the jig is up. Ever since Georges Franju made his short-film masterpiece, *The Blood of the Beasts*, in a slaughter-house, someone somewhere has been trying to persuade us that our *filet mignon* is the end-product of Original Sin.

Yet Makuck is not to be trifled with. That his development as a poet will be formidable is suggested in such unequivocal poems as "Steel Valley," "My Son Draws an Apple Tree," "Letter Poem" and "To the Snow-Walker." He lacks humor because he is still surprised by death; this at least argues a love of earth in him and a touching regard, as many of his poems reveal, for the lives that prepared his and for the life he has hopefully pledged himself to conserve.

One of the perennial problems faced by the critic when writing a composite chronicle is when to quote, when merely to sum up; and the more multiple the poet's interests, the harder it is for the critic to give an adequately succinct answer to the implied question—What is this poetry about? I can say that Jane Flanders' poems[5] are

[5] THE STUDENTS OF SNOW, by *Jane Flanders*. University of Massachusetts Press. $8.00; $4.00.

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about growing up in Pennsylvania, about the name and nature of snowflakes and moss, about what happened to perceptions of reality after Manet, about Gettysburg yesterday and today, about murder in the juvenile heart. Does one say *anything* by stating what poems are *about*? I think *yes*: we can provide an irreducible clue; we can define the cut of a poet's jib; we can locate his home as earth, air, water or fire. Even so, if you haven't read the stuff, your critic is still stuck with the choice of quoting one or two poems in full and falsifying the poet by ignoring his other heads or of quoting sample lines from diverse sources in the belief that versatility of attention is a good thing and should be advertised. I am thereby forced by my own argument to quote across contents in this volume, since it seems important to me to illustrate how the middle-register voice can make intellectual distinctions, play games with other forms of imagination and evoke emotions of disquiet, all without resort to histrionic changes of pitch. From "The Students of Snow":

> Even in old age the students of snow
> adore bad weather,
> but they will tell you, the light
> glinting off their spectacles, snow can fall
> even from clear skies.
> They say that true
> crystals are not formed from clouds,
> but from the unseen molecules within them.
> And then they cease to speak, caught up
> in the study of silence, transparency,
> the radiant wedding of nebulae.

From "His Niche," beginning and end:

> Evasion was his specialty,
> the long pause, the white space
> on the page. What he didn't say
> was wonderful. He was moved by
> emptiness and the way invisible things
> like air and love try to fill it.
> . . . .
> In the end they reduced his body
> to pure white ash and praised him
> as poet of absence, master of all
> the vast, untented realm of possiblity.

"Pas de Deux"—a poem, complete:

> First the mouse dances.
> Then they dance together.
> Then the cat dances alone.

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This is Jane Flanders' second volume; her first was published by Theodore Weiss in his 1980 *Quarterly Review of Literature* (Series 3–4). In it, as in this one, there was not an insecure poem and many had an attractive savagery. In the present collection, she *is* cool; it might be thought that she has more wit than warmth. But time will ring changes. Meanwhile she has intelligence, flexible with nuance: no common gift.

To me it's an odd and reassuring sign of something-or-other that a press in North Carolina has undertaken to publish Irish poets, whom we might not otherwise hear of for years. In London, where the publication of Irish and Scottish poetry is evidently as sporadic as it is here, a critic recently murmured, when trying to account for the absence of the Irish in the foreground, that Thomas Kinsella had vanished into the wilds of America. Perhaps a New Yorker would best appreciate the description of Philadelphia as "the wilds"! John Montague is not an invisible man, either; he has lived in America and been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. Yet he is not as familiar to American readers of poetry (that phantom horde!) as *I* think he should be. Among Irish poets since Yeats he is now an elder statesman and with every passing year his poetry has increased in power and wisdom. For this very welcome publication he has made his own selections.[6] The man is comprehensive: he seems to have incorporated in his verse all the separate talents of his countrymen—their lyric voices, their love of the land, their swift, dour way with a characterization, their heady political spirit, their frequently embittered resignation. To these he has added an acquaintance with life on the continent which up to now has not been a common diversion of the Irish. But his music and his ardor, tinged with sadness (and one should not overlook his rage), are most imposingly present when he is writing of the Irish countryside, as in "Windharp":

> The sounds of Ireland,
> that restless whispering
> you never get away
> from, seeping out of
> low bushes and grass,
> heatherbells and fern,
> wrinkling bog pools,
> scraping free branches,
> light hunting cloud,
> sound hounding sight,
> a hand ceaselessly
> combing and stroking
> the landscape, till
> the valley gleams

[6] SELECTED POEMS, by *John Montague*. Wake Forest University Press. $14.95; $7.95.

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like the pile upon
a mountain pony's coat.

No sooner have I decided that Montague is preeminently the poet of landscape than I reread one of his shattering love poems and divide my mind. ("Love poems" is not right, either. I mean the whole spectrum: bower, lust and damnation.) At the sensual level, has anyone done better than this (from "Don Juan's Farewell")?

. . . your drowsy partner
drifts towards the
warm shores of sleep
and you slowly awake
to confront again
the alluring lie
of searching through
another's pliant body
for something missing
in your separate self
while profound night
like a black swan
goes pluming past

We know nothing of love until we know its catastrophes and Montague is tremendously adroit at capturing the emotion in situations which have brushed catastrophe: fearfully and wistfully in "She Walks Alone"; with vindictive horror in "Meduse" ("the hiss of seed / Into that mawlike womb / Is the whimper of death being born"); with ashen nausea in "Special Delivery." A long-standing favorite of mine, in a quite different key, is that cinematic poem (the setting is in fact California!) entitled "All Legendary Obstacles," where he recounts the anxiety of waiting at a railroad station for a woman, in "the hissing drift of winter rain." His anticipation is in excess of anything we know of the couple in the poem and it is precisely this—our ignorance, joined with our recognition of the perennial moment, which gives the poem its peculiar tension; then the relief and the final startling image.

At midnight you came, pale
above the negro porter's lamp.
I was too blind with rain
And doubt to speak, but
Reached from the platform
Until our chilled hands met.

You had been travelling for days
With an old lady, who marked

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A neat circle on the glass
With her glove, to watch us
Move into the wet darkness
Kissing, still unable to speak.

He reaches out, this man. I find such poems irresistible.

When Paul Valéry read that bit by Pascal about the infinite spaces between the stars frightening the beJesus out of him, he commented drily that Pascal should have been reassured by the hubbub in his immediate vicinity. Derek Mahon, I am convinced, finds Valéry's viewpoint sympathetic.[7] Like many of us he is dreadfully aware that what we know of the world may end in our time; yet, like all of us, inheritor of contradictory news and apocalyptic anticlimaxes, he hedges his bets, rebuking himself as "a chiliastic prig." Mahon is another Irish gift from North Carolina whom I, for one, had not read a word of before this magazine published two of his poems last year (Vol. XXXV, No. 2). Within the immediate Irish frame of reference Mahon is difficult to place; his verse resembles neither that of his seniors (Thomas Kinsella, John Montague, Richard Murphy) nor that of his most famous contemporary in age, Seamus Heaney. Only five of the poems in *The Hunt by Night* have an Irish setting, and these bear no trace of political presupposition. Since Mahon lives in London, it is unlikely that he is suppressing an ancient grudge against the English (I guarantee nothing!) and I feel sure he must be the only Irish poet around who writes villanelles and a form of the rondeau (abccba?).

His title poem is his virtual subject here. In the event, it denotes the Uccello painting of 1465 (in the Ashmolean at Oxford) which, as he sees it (if I don't minimize his concept), is an aesthetic euphemism for our *condition humaine*.

. . . .
The mild herbaceous air
  Is lemon-blue

    The glade aglow
  With pleasant mysteries,
Diuretic depots, pungent prey;
  And midnight hints at break of day
    Where, among sombre trees,
      The slim dogs go

    Wild with suspense
  Leaping to left and right,
Their cries receding to a point

[7] THE HUNT BY NIGHT, by *Derek Mahon*. Wake Forest University Press. $4.95p.

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Masked by obscurities of paint—
As if our hunt by night,
So very tense,

So long pursued
In what dark cave begun
And not yet done, were not the great
Adventure we suppose but some elaborate
Spectacle put on for fun
And not for food.

In another part of Mahon's forest ("The Globe in North Carolina") he returns to his pictorial correlative as he tries (with a touch of Auden, if I'm not far out) to convince himself that what cannot happen *will* happen.

No doubt we could go on like this
For decades yet; but nemesis
Awaits our furious make-believe,
Our harsh refusal to conceive
A world so different from our own
We wouldn't know it were we shown

And what will the new night be like?
Why, as before, a partial dark
Stage-lit by a mysterious glow
As in the *Night Hunt* of Uccello.

What determines whether or not a poet (or any man) feels the tragic sense? His daily experience? his reading? his capacity for love? the coincidence of his character with the years of his lease? his chemistry? I suspect that by nature Mahon is a survivor; his perception of endings is frustrated by his tendency to be happy; or perhaps by a more conscious resolution, by what Thomas Kinsella has beautifully called "the restored necessity to learn." Whatever is the case, the contradictory impulses that enable him to write the *carpe diem* ode from Horace—"Act with zest / one day at a time, and never mind the rest" and, for example, his quasi-Brecht aphorism—"The man / Who laughs is merely someone / Who has not yet heard the terrible news"—this contradiction is at present the heart and source of his ingratiating presence.

God help an Englishman who tries to establish hierarchy among Irish poets, who pits the North against Eire or vice versa. I am prepared to live dangerously by asserting that there are few poets writing English anywhere whose verses so purely exhibit the fusion of passion with euphony as those by Eavan Boland of Dublin.[8] Her

[8] NIGHT FEED, by *Eavan Boland*. Arlen House (Dublin). np

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poems ring like bells across the snow. These stanzas which, with a stab of conscience, I am excising from her poem "Lights," relate a long voyage home to Ireland when the poet was twelve; they are doubly effective when read within the chronicle of time that extends the poem, but the whole is a space-eater and I must be content to offer this sonorous example.

> This was the Arctic garden:
> A hard, sharkless Eden
> Porched by the North,
> A snow-shrubbed orchard
> Of Aurora Borealis,
> Apple-green and rosy
> Behind an ice wall.
> But I was a child of the Fall.
>
> I loved the python waves,
> The sinuous, tailing blaze
> Coiled in polar water
> Shoaling towards the cold
> Where ice-muscled daughters
> Of myth sang for sailors
> Who lay with them and lie
> Lost in phosphor graves.

The most formidable poems in her previous volume were leveled at the torments of fruitless womanhood; some, in the present collection, sing (vehemently!) the burden of time and the ineluctable demotion of the flesh ("The Woman Changes Her Skin"; "The Woman Turns Herself into a Fish"; "The Woman as Mummy's Head"). Many others, half of the total, I'd say, celebrate the wonders of motherhood and the lactic poetry of the everyday, the domain of bottles, of washers and driers, of feeding and tucking-in. I hope I am pardoned if I remark that these recitals are not calculated to convert *my* sounds of woe into hey nonny nonny! But this woman is a witch of poetry; she can make you believe in anything—even the marriage of heaven and hell.

I would guess that the tenacity with which she circumscribes and exalts a chosen subject depends closely on her emotional fortunes in life. She transcends solipsism by the perfection with which she models a *poem* from its subjective source. Nothing is left to chance: the click of consonants, the echo of vowels, internal rhyme, syllabic counterpoint. Her art often consists in the impression she gives of having rushed to the page, her eye in a fine frenzy rolling, but we know it couldn't have happened that way; it's safe to assume that she has consigned thousands of imprecisions to the waste basket. It will be interesting to see for just how long she will be able to sustain her almost unremitting exclusion of the inhabited poem that intro-

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duced her eight years ago. A handful of poems in the current volume, neither denunciatory nor domestic, may predict a future shift from her self-intensive phase. The following quotations are, respectively, a sestet and an octet from two sonnets. From "Woman Posing," after the painting, "Mrs. Badham," by Ingres:

> She smirks uneasily at what she's shirking
> Sitting on this chair in silly clothes
> Posing in a truancy of frills.
> There's no repose in her broad knees.
> The shawl she shoulders just upholsters her.
> She hands the open book like pantry keys.

From "On Renoir's *The Grape-Pickers*":

> They seem to be what they are harvesting:
> Rumps, elbows, hips clustering
> Plumply in the sun, a fuss of shines
> Wining from the ovals of their elbows.
> The brush plucks them from a tied vine.
> Such roundness, such a sound vintage
> Of circles, such a work of pure spheres!
> Flesh and shadow mesh inside each other.

Flesh and shadow mesh inside each other! If these stanzas were not so intrinsically musical, one would be tempted to call them sculptural. Compact yet plastic, they fashion before one's eyes the living shape and ambience of a personality. W. H. Auden once proclaimed: "Whatever else it may be, I want every poem I write to be a hymn in praise of the English language." Few of his stoutest admirers (I am one) would agree that this fervent hope accurately describes the substance of his achievement. For my purpose, it comes near to explaining the resonance of Eavan Boland's achievement.

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JAY PARINI

Reading the Readers: Barthes and Sontag

ROLAND BARTHES WAS MORE OF A READER than a writer.[1] His writing was largely a sustained reading of the world as refracted in the complex mirror of his own mind. He was a literary dandy, not a scientist, and his project—life as perpetual self-examination—represents the latest stage in the development of the French *essai*. Montaigne is Barthes's greatest ancestor, his implicit model for the practice of writing from the self into the world and back again. The exercise of sensibility was his vocation, a position one identifies with aesthetes such as Wilde or Valéry, and his ultimate failure to press beyond the essay as an accumulation of *aperçus* can be traced to the spiritual limits of aestheticism itself, which cannot help separating style from content in the effort to elevate the former over the latter.

Barthes was an aesthete from the beginning, though his early writings record a persistent struggle with this fact. Like Sartre and other Leftist intellectuals, Barthes wanted to move beyond his middle-class origins. He embraced the notion of *littérature engagé* early on, embracing Marxism briefly, favoring prose that was free of vested notions and conventional attitudes—the famous "white style" (*l'écriture blanche*) of Camus in *The Stranger*. His best known early work was *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), an attempt to expose the necessary subjectivity of all "objective" literature. For example, he says that "classical writing was a ceremonial which manifested the implantation of the writer into a political society, and that to speak like Vaugelas meant in the first place to be connected with the exercise of power." He goes on to talk of Stalinist writing as the perfection of language as a closed system of value, where everything comes down to definition, the process by which values are attached to words, and "the function of writing is to cut one stage out of a process: there is no more lapse between naming and judging."

This conclusion led Barthes inevitably into the discovery that language controls the writer, "writes" the writer, more than he realizes: "Whereas an ideally free language never could function as a sign of my own person and would give no information whatsoever about my history and my freedom, the writing to which I entrust myself

[1] A BARTHES READER, ed., with an introduction, by *Susan Sontag*. Hill and Wang. $20.00.

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already exists entirely as an institution; it reveals my past and my choice, it gives me a history, it blazons forth my situation, it commits me without my having to declare the fact." Barthes was quickly separating himself from Marxism, with its own "encoded" language, even as he wrote. His ironic voice (the aesthete's stock-in-trade) cut through the portentousness of Althusser's "scientific" Marxism, Lefevre's Marxian "idealisms," and Sartre's "existential" Marxism. He was drawn, in the mid-fifties, to Saussure, the founder of semiology, the general science of signs.

The wit of aesthetes has always turned on binary distinctions. ("It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances," said Oscar Wilde, for example. "The mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.") Thus, it was natural for Barthes to admire the binary world of structuralist demarcation; the dialogic tension of structural (synchronic) versus historical (diachronic) dimensions of myth and history neatly paralleled the linguist's division of language into *langue*, the general system of language, and *parole*, or individual expression. Barthes hit upon the notion of applying the methods of structural analysis to literature, first, then to cultural phenomena in general.

His infamous application of the new method was *On Racine* (1963). Barthes wrote:

> Racine's plays appear not as the polished vehicles for a moral view of the world as approved by the French literary establishment, but as the basis for a "Racinian anthropology" whose complex, highly patterned system of thematic opposition generates a variety of hitherto unheard-of (or suppressed) psychological structures.

With characteristic wit, Barthes outlined the moral code of Racinian drama, focusing on the disruptions that followed any breaks in that code. He showed that aggression—within an erotic mode—is more central to the drama than romantic love. As usual, his work starts from a severely anti-authoritarian point-of-view, calling into question all pat formulations about what Racine really meant to "prove." He moves gradually to a position near aestheticism. Not surprisingly, *On Racine* was viciously attacked (most notoriously by Raymond Picard, an orthodox Racine scholar from the Sorbonne, who called Barthes an impostor). Every self-respecting French intellectual threw in his or her two cents, of course; when the dust settled, Barthes was unscathed and firmly established as the leading expositor of *la nouvelle critique*.

Shortly after writing *On Racine*, Barthes decided to put the infant science of semiology on a more theoretical basis, thereby producing his *Elements of Semiology* (1964) and *System of Fashion* (1967). These are his two most systematic books as well as the two least likely to

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attract the general reader. Susan Sontag rightly omits samples of these from *A Barthes Reader*, passing over *S/Z* (1970), too. *S/Z* is an odd but highly inventive grammar of reading. Barthes "reads" one short story by Balzac, and his own commentary is seven times longer than the story itself, an attempt to listen to the text's inner sounds. (What Barthes seems to hear, alas, is Barthes himself.)

S/Z led inexorably to "the later Barthes," the essayist as autobiographer, the critic as self-reader, one who could search out the subtext of every text, separating *plaisir* (pleasure) from *jouissance* (satisfaction, enjoyment) in such a way that the former connects with content, the latter with style. In *Sade/ Fourier/ Loyola* (1971), for instance, Barthes explored the fantasies of Sade in order to locate the pleasures of the language itself, ignoring the sexual-sadistic aspects of the work. This is pure aestheticism, overlaid with a great deal of camouflaging rhetoric about "a new language that is traversed by natural language, but open to semiological definition." Nevertheless, in his ingenious linking of Sade (the sadist), Fourier (the utopian) and Loyola (the Jesuits' founder), he shows convincingly how all three make happiness (*plaisir/jouissance*) dependent on rigid codes. Each, with his mania for classification, dissects reality much as a grammarian takes apart a sentence. As ever, Barthes finds an underlying subtext, a hidden system, to expose.

Like his countryman, Jacques Lacan, Barthes was attracted to psychoanalytic methods. Psychoanalysis employs a combination of linguistic, symbolic, and contextual associations. But unlike Lacan, Barthes was interested only in *texts*, not the authors behind them. Lacan tries to uncover the unconscious; Barthes first "unites a text, rediscovers its unconscious categories," then pursues every conceivable connection between the reader and the text. On one level, his "erotics of reading" explores the possibilities of meaning in a particular work; on another level, he examines the general process by which meaning is created, moving toward the posited "metalanguage" of semiotics—a language that would allow the critic to refer neutrally to language from a privileged vantage point outside of it.

In his later work, which is well represented by Sontag except for the omission of any selection from *Empire of Signs* (a recently published meditation on Japanese culture), Barthes turned more explicitly to autobiographic and impressionistic prose. His books became journals, records of minute fluctuations of a highly developed sensibility. In a sense, Barthes came full circle at the end, since his earliest published work (reprinted here) was a series of "notes" on Gide's *Journal*. Before Barthes himself, Gide was the highwater mark in this century of the persistent French tradition of egoism that runs backward through Rousseau, Pascal, and Montaigne. The first premise of this egoism is the latter's remark that "each man contains within himself the whole form of the human condition." The writer's job, then, as Barthes suggested in his commentary on

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Gide, is merely to reveal himself: "Gide is a simultaneous being. To a greater or lesser degree, Nature has posited him as complete, from the very first. He has merely taken the time to reveal the various aspects of himself in succession." In Barthes's later essays he turned self-voyeur, making a text of himself, writing himself into being. But, as Sontag notes, "Barthes's late work is filled with signals that he has come to the end of something—the enterprise of the critic as artist—and was seeking to become another kind of writer."

The other kind of writer Barthes projected for himself is glimpsed in the grand inaugural lecture he gave in 1977 at the Collège de France. The lecture trades on a wonderful paradox. Barthes was being installed to the brand new Chair of Literary Semiology; at the same time, he used this occasion to throw grave doubts on the very possibility of a "metalanguage." "Human language," he said, "has no exterior." He remarked that it is precisely in contemplating the sign itself that semiology "discovers that every relation of exteriority of one language to another is, *in the long run*, intolerable." This radical disavowal of a science of signs, a semiology, represents a backing away from theory for a writer whose work up to this point was tantalizing *because* it held out the carrot of metalinguistics. Barthes did not wish to denigrate semiology entirely, of course; rather, he proposed an ancillary relation to "real" science: "It can help certain sciences, can be their fellow traveler for a while. . . . Thus, the best developed part of semiology, the analysis of narrative, can be useful for History, ethnology, textual criticism, exegesis, and iconology."

He ended his inaugural with a beautiful paragraph about being reborn, of taking up a *vita nuova*:

> I undertake therefore to let myself be borne on by the force of any living life, forgetfulness. There is an age at which we teach what we know. Then comes another age at which we teach what we do not know; this is called *research*. Now perhaps comes the age of another experience: that of *unlearning*, of yielding to the unforeseeable change which forgetting imposes upon the sedimentation of the knowledges, cultures, and beliefs we have traversed.

Struck dead by a van in 1980, he had little time to pursue his unlearning, to unweave the elaborate text of Roland Barthes. According to his friends, he was about to write his first novel at this time—yet another radical departure, a reversal from theory to practice. What he left behind, however, is an impressive body of work concerned largely with literature and other modes of discourse that illustrate man's habit of compulsive sign-making: *homo significas*. His criticism calls into question the language of criticism itself, stressing

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the degree to which this language uses the critic as well as vice versa. His message is repeatedly this: language makes us. He saw language as an infinitely complex texture, a weaving, in which "the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the secretions constructing his web." The power of his assertions has been deeply felt in the world of Anglo-American criticism.

Sontag has done an able job of editing Barthes, and her introduction is thoughtful, an elegiac retrospective, what in the eighteenth century would have been called an *éloge*—a commemoration of the illustrious dead. This introduction to Barthes forms the concluding essay in her own selection, *A Susan Sontag Reader*,[2] which consists of essays and excerpts from her fiction. It is quite instructive to read the Barthes and Sontag *Readers* in tandem; the real thing looks even more real beside the imitation.

Sontag's ability to stay one step ahead of Continental Thinking has earned her high marks in the world of intellectual journalism. She is always a half-step ahead of the fashion, with a knack for saying the outrageous thing—*à la* Barthes—but without the impishness and controlled ambivalence of her master. Where Sontag is correct, she is often sophomoric; where she is wrong, she is irritating and, frequently, pretentious. Her style reflects this pompousness, as when she writes: "Spirituality = plans, terminologies, ideas of deportment aimed at resolving the painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence." Were her essays (and fiction) not bestrewn with such stuff, one would have to assume she was kidding.

Sontag is always dead serious, even when she is "being funny." Her first book was *The Benefactor* (1963), a novel about a young man called Hippolyte (move over, Racine!) who has strange dreams and then, for some reason, attempts to duplicate them in his life. Says her hero: "I am surprised dreams are not outlawed. What a promise the dream is! How delightful! How private! And one needs no partner, one need not enlist the cooperation of anyone, female or male. Dreams are the onanism of the spirit." Perhaps this is meant to be funny. Sontag's *Reader* begins with eighty-five pages of this stiff, almost unreadable novel.

Five essays from *Against Interpretation* (1966) follow. They are written in a style reminiscent of Oscar Wilde and Barthes but with the suppleness of neither. "Against Interpretation," the title essay, argues that "all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation." This is backed up by a sophomoric excursion into what Plato meant by mimesis. What is wrong here is that Sontag assumes a naive dichotomy of form and content,

[2] A SUSAN SONTAG READER, with an introduction by *Elizabeth Hardwick*. Farrar, Straus, & Giroux. $17.95.

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thus allowing herself (in the tradition of aestheticism) to champion form-as-style over content-as-message. She casts aspersions on all "reactionary" critics who stifle us with their boring "interpretations," pleading for "an erotics of art" in place of sterile academic hermeneutics. Her rhetoric is all fizz, without intellectual rigor or moral force.

Without any fear of inconsistency, she begins her essay "On Style" with this sentence: "It would be hard to find any respectable literary critic today who would care to be caught defending *as an idea* the old antithesis of style versus content." She goes on to say how they nevertheless assume a form and content division, anyway; they aim right for content like buzzards diving at a carcass. Again, she argues against "interpretation" along what might be called neo-Romantic lines, not unlike the Lawrence who said, in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine*, "Analysis presupposes a corpse." For Sontag, " 'style' is art. And art is nothing more or less than various modes of stylized, dehumanized representation." Once more, she opts for style over content, although she does so with a contemporary flair, demanding self-sufficiency in the work of art. Her belief in the total absorption of content into the formal aspects of the work itself is her version of Romantic organicism, Russian formalism, and recent French poetics; but Sontag's refusal to acknowledge any mimetic qualities, which would be an admission of the world's ontological priority, leaves her on shaky ground. Her opinions are necessarily presented as aphorisms, in the form of "notes," since they do not add up to sustained arguments.

Sontag includes her famous "Notes on Camp," but she leaves out "On Culture and the New Sensibility," which was the most provocative piece in *Against Interpretation*. Perhaps she no longer wants to associate with the viewpoint represented there, where she wrote:

> One important consequence of the new sensibility (with its abandonment of the Matthew Arnold idea of culture) has already been alluded to—namely, that the distinction between "high" and "low" culture seems less and less meaningful. For such a distinction—inseparable from the Matthew Arnold apparatus—simply does not make sense for a creative community of artists and scientists engaged in programming sensations, uninterested in art as a species of moral journalism.

One can see why she would abandon this stance, which is blatantly anti-intellectual; nonetheless, her work retains this quality. Anti-intellectualism pervades the "Notes on Camp," for instance, with its celebration of Camp as "the sensibility of failed seriousness." Elitism surfaces (and does several pirouettes) in remarks like this one: "A pocket history of Camp might, of course, begin . . . with the mannerist artists like Pontormo, Rosso, and Carravaggio, or the extraor-

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dinarily theatrical paintings of Georges de La Tour, or euphuism (Lyly, etc.) in literature." So much for the Matthew Arnold idea of culture.

One has to wonder if Sontag is serious much of the time. Attempting on the one hand to abolish the distinctions between "high" and "low" art, she focuses repeatedly on works that might be called Camp Highbrow: Pierre Louÿs's *Trois Filles de leur Mère*, George Bataille's *Histoire de l'Oeil* and *Madame Edwards*, the *Mystica Theologia* of Dionysius the Areopagite, and so forth. She uses the old trick of name-dropping to a ludicrous degree; unlike, say, George Steiner, whose excessive name-dropping at least suggests the resonating chamber of a deeply learned mind, Sontag does not call up the sense of connected worlds. The reader is asked to admire her range, which is all breadth and no depth, not enter into a process of thought with her.

From *I, etcetera* Sontag includes a curiosity called "Project for a Trip to China" (1972), which consists of notes jotted down in aphoristic fashion. A few examples:

> I am going to China.
>
> I will walk across the Lulu Bridge spanning the Sham Chun River between Hong Kong and China.
>
> After having been in China for a while, I will walk across the Lulu Bridge spanning the Sham Chun River between China and Hong Kong.
>
> Five variables:
> Lulu Bridge
> Sham Chun River
> Hong Kong
> China
> peaked cloth caps

This is a Chaplinesque version of Keats's Egotistical Sublime. Sontag has made the not quite rare mistake of believing that since her most incidental thoughts are interesting to her, they must surely be interesting to readers. These jottings do, however, contain one morsel: "One certainty: China inspired the first lie I remember telling. Entering the first grade, I told my classmates that I was born in China. I think they were impressed." And this concluding remark: "Perhaps I will write the book about my trip to China before I go." Both point to continuing problems with Sontag as a writer: her desire to impress at whatever cost (including truthfulness), and her tendency to write about the world before she has taken time to understand it.

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There is also another novel-excerpt, from *Death Kit* (1967), which concerns the feeble attempts of one "Diddy" to figure out whether or not he really did (*did he?* = Diddy) murder a workman in a train tunnel. Though very brief, the excerpt is unspeakably tedious—a thing no novelist can afford to be. The setting is entirely abstract, impalpable, idealized. Critical aphorisms (which sound like parodies of Barthes) jump out of the narrative to assert Sontag's presence: "Dying is overwork" or "The splendor of children is never, really, more than pathos." One marvels at Sontag's willingness to type out such a novel.

Her best work is certainly in the criticism, and one does find patches of brilliance, as in "The Image-World," taken from *On Photography* (1977), where she says:

> The powers of photography have in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals. It suited Plato's derogatory attitude toward images to liken them to shadows—transitory, minimally informative, immaterial, impotent co-presences of the real things which cast them. But the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality—for turning *it* into a shadow.

This is cleverly said, but one wishes she did not feel compelled to go on and conclude that "if there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well." The word *ecology* can afford only so much abuse.

Perhaps the main problem in Sontag is that she wants everything all ways: a "radical" stance (with the implicit choices involved) and the cool amoral impartiality of Wildean aestheticism. She wants to be a democrat, but she clings to Camp exclusiveness. She disdains critics who still separate content from style, then she does just that when it suits her argument. For instance, in "On Style" she defends the work of the Nazi filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl on the grounds that the "content has come to play a purely formal role." Style, she argues, is what counts in good filmmaking. Nine years later, in "Fascinating Fascism" (1974), she suddenly sees that content does occasionally matter, calling Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* a "film whose very conception negates the possibility of the filmmaker's having an aesthetic conception independent of propaganda." Called onto the carpet by an interviewer for this obvious breach of consistency (the interview is reprinted in the *Reader*), she replies:

> The paragraph about Riefenstahl in "On Style" is correct—as far

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> as it goes. It just doesn't go very far. While it is true that her films in some sense transcend the propaganda for which they are the vehicle, their specific qualities show how their aestheticizing conception is itself identical with a certain brand of propaganda.

This is called eating your cake and having it, too.

Both Sontag and Barthes argue from a position that cannot, finally, withstand excessive scrutiny. The aesthete can never resist putting key words in quotation marks, thus undermining the seriousness of any statement. Art is a form of play, but it is serious play—as is the play of children—what Auden called "a game of knowledge." Art depends upon what Wallace Stevens called "the necessary angel / of reality." If art is not a criticism of life, per se, as Matthew Arnold would have it, it is nonetheless an interpretation of it. Barthes, at his best, interprets the world-as-text, tacitly rendering judgments that can only be called moral. Sontag is just too dead-set against interpretation to read the world at all.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

SEAMUS HEANEY's latest book of poems was *Field Work* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979). *Sweeney Astray*, a translation of a medieval Irish work, will appear in the fall. Mr. Heaney received *The Hudson Review*'s Bennett Award in 1982.

ELIZABETH SPENCER* has been awarded the 1983 Award for Merit Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters for the short story. *The Stories of Elizabeth Spencer* (Doubleday, 1981) has recently been reissued by Penguin, and a new novel, *The Salt Line*, will appear soon.

JONATHAN CHAVES teaches Chinese Language and Literature at George Washington University.

LOUIS SIMPSON has two books scheduled for publication this fall: a collection of new poems, *The Darkest Hour of the Night* (Ticknor and Fields), and *People Live Here: Selected Poems 1949–1983* (BOA Editions).

GAIL MAZUR is the author of *Nightfire*, published by David R. Godine.

MARY J. CARRUTHERS* is a professor of English at the University of Illinois in Chicago. Her teaching and research focus primarily on medieval literature and language.

JOHN FINLAY* lives on a farm in south Alabama. He has just completed a book of poems, and is working on a book of criticism dealing with gods in modern literature.

DOROTHY ROBERTS is preparing her fourth collection of poetry. Her work is represented in the recent *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*.

PATRICIA SHEPPARD is a poet/lawyer who lives in Iowa City.

DEAN FLOWER teaches American literature and modern fiction at Smith College, and has recently become an advisory editor of this Review.

DONALD E. STANFORD has retired this year as co-editor of *The Southern Review*. His most recent books are *Selected Letters of Robert Bridges, Volume I* and *Revolution and Convention in Modern Poetry*, both published by Delaware Press.

JAY PARINI's book of poetry, *Anthracite Country*, was recently published by Random House.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

In Pursuit of the Life Itself

THE FIRST PERSON NARRATIVE—the confession—just may be the most compelling direction a writer can take. Since the histories of Gregory of Tours, since the confessions of Augustine, countless writers have chosen the stories of their lives as the only stories worth telling. The advantages and disadvantages of this path, oft debated, are briefly these: on the one hand immediate engagement with audience, direct involvement in the story itself, a greater sense of urgency that is more a result of that direct involvement and less a by-product of a structural (linguistic) organization; on the other hand a disregard for audience, an inability on the author's part to distance himself from his subject, and a linguistic display that is part pyrotechnics, part poverty, depending on the blend of quirks borrowed from other writers.

Advantages, disadvantages. These imply success and failure, but anyone who reads a confessional narrative in adequate light is aware that judging such work is not so simple. For example, consider whether or not Augustine distanced himself from his subject. Consider, too, the style of Gregory. Laborious, almost illiterate. Still, it does not blot out his ability to create scenes that peel back the surfaces of life. Who could associate failure with either writer? In contemporary literature, consider the flagrant disregard for audience—occasionally crossing over to outright hostility—present in the work of many practitioners of metafiction. Is this fact enough to dismiss these writers? It would not be wise. If a confessional narrative fails, there must be another reason for it, another reason for sentencing it to a forlorn table at a yard sale.

The fact is that the criteria frequently imposed on confessional narrative (the advantages and disadvantages mentioned earlier) are inadequate. This critical failure is the result of overlooking one simple fact: a confessional narrative, more than anything else, must tell the truth. The writer who is unsure of his subject or unsure of the way he feels about it will unwittingly shift his focus. He will begin to embellish the truth for the sake of beauty. He will become a sybarite of style, an architect of artifice. This explains the limitations and numerous failures of confessional poetry and prose. To tell the truth, to stake out a vantage point of almost saintly observation, to narrate in language that the truth of the subject demands—these should be the goals of the confessional narrative writer. They

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should also determine the ultimate standards by which that writer will be judged.

In *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*,[1] William Least Heat Moon gives us an ambitious, aggressive, uneven tour of America's back roads and of his own self-awareness—or lack of it. Ultimately he neither succeeds nor fails. For some readers, this is the greatest failure of all, but they do not care much for literature, preferring, as they do, to read only *masterpieces*.

The scheme of *Blue Highways* is this: Heat Moon (William Trogdon), separated nine months from his wife of Cherokee descent, loses his job at a Missouri college. Heartsick and unemployed, he resolves to drive his modest van along the forgotten American roads that appear on maps as blue lines. What better way to get a grip on one's life, to observe, learn, and start again? Familiar precursors, *On the Road*, *Travels With Charley*, encourage us to settle in for a valuable, vicarious journey into our country and ourselves. This is the principle strength of *Blue Highways*—its concept. We are all familiar with America's massive identity crisis, common enough in a young country. And some of us are aware, too, of the need for more beneath-the-surface portraits held up to its face, to our faces. The concept is strong. In its unraveling Heat Moon convinces me that he is telling the truth perhaps forty percent of the time. And that's the problem. It is not enough of a problem to warrant dismissal or condemnation, but it is enough to lace the praise I do have with some serious reservations. The ultimate problem for the reader is this: because he cannot believe the author half the time, he begins to wonder if he should believe him at all. This is a terrible corner for an author to write himself into. Heat Moon winds up there as a result of his sensibility and its literary expression, point of view.

Heat Moon's sometimes defective sensibility manifests itself in the snap judgments he makes of the people he meets along the way. If they are laid back, helpful, chatty, he is bound to wax poetic and philosophical about the mysterious bonds between us. If, however, they are truculent, grinding axes that are not sympathetic with Heat Moon's own, then they are haughtily dismissed as drones of the evil moneyed class. They deserve fast food, leisure suits, and plywood suburban tracts. A tangential bathetic feature consists of the numerous stops the narrator makes at college campuses for a place to sleep, a shower, a learnèd meal. Anyone who yearns for the fare of a college cafeteria has no business maligning the products of McDonald's, Hardees, and their swift relations. The narrator's judgments, in other words, are frequently simplistic, embodying clichés that make him sound like a dropout flower child of the sixties.

[1] BLUE HIGHWAYS: A Journey into America, by *William Least Heat Moon*. Atlantic-Little, Brown. $17.50.

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Here are two examples. First, the author stops in Wallace, North Carolina. It's been a tough day.

> I wished for a corner tavern with neon and a wooden bar, but I would have settled for a concrete block beerjoint. I grumbled at a hypocrisy that encouraged people to drink in the back ends of pickups. I wanted to go into the churches and hard cuss the congregations as if they were gourd seeds.

Later, he visits the Woodstock Inn at Woodstock, Vermont.

> Cars parked out front were either elaborate hood-ornament models or Saabs, the Volkswagen of the Ivy League. On a BMW was a bumper sticker: *Polo at Skidmore*. On a Mercedes a vanity license plate: *Style*. Throughout I saw a compulsion toward panache, a thing these people needed as the peacock needs its iridescent plumes.

There are several similar examples in *Blue Highways* of Heat Moon's tendency readily to embrace pretentious, almost adolescent snap judgments. This alone will make the book appealing to teenagers, and they may become its most devoted, cultish readers. Unfortunately, the author has limited himself by apparently failing to realize that this is a book about also-rans. They are not only the hangers-on in strangled towns bypassed by interstates. They are not only the people displaced by progress, who feel most comfortable with yesterday, who take pride in their survival and endurance. The also-rans include the workers in towns beside the interstates, include the maligned human instruments of progress. What unites us is the self-questioning impulse. Heat Moon implies repeatedly that only the highly visible have-nots and outcasts are capable of self-analysis, worthy of praise. It just isn't so, and anyone who cares for the life around him knows it.

The other more glaring and serious example of Heat Moon's flawed sensibility consists of his inability to record faithfully the conversations of others. Though this is not true throughout the book, a number of the dialogues between the author and the people he meets sound far too literary to be real. One example occurs early in the journey when Heat Moon stops at Claudia Sanders Dinner House in Shelbyville, Kentucky. He enters into conversation with a husband and wife.

> We talked and I sat waiting for the question. It got there before the olives and celery. "What do you do?" the husband asked.
>
> I told my lie, turned it to a joke, and then gave an answer too long. As I talked, the man put a pair of forks, a spoon, and knife into a lever system that changed directions twice before lifting his salad plate.

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He said, "I notice that you use *work* and *job* interchangeably. Oughten to do that. A job's what you force yourself to pay attention to for money. With work, you don't have to force yourself. There are a lot of jobs in this country, and that's good because they keep people occupied. That's why they're called 'occupations.' "

The woman said, "Cal works at General Electric in Louisville. He's a metallurgical engineer."

"I don't *work* there. I'm employed there," he said to her. Then to me, "I'm supposed to spend my time 'imagineering,' but the job isn't so much a matter of getting something new made. It's a matter of making it *look like* we're getting something made. You know what my work is? You know what I pay attention to? Covering my tracks. Pretending, covering my tracks, and getting through another day. That's my work. Imagineering's my job."

We know from our own experience and from accounts like Studs Terkel's *Working* that Americans do not sound like this. One wonders why the author felt the need to revise, to embellish the truth.

And yet, as I said before, this is not always the case. There are occasions when Heat Moon does not wear his learning immodestly on his sleeve, when his intention is not to work as a catalyst for consciousness-raising. There are moments when his concern for style does not embarrass the reader with precious *poetry* ("In the morning, an incident of blackbirds happened") or with feeble, Raymond Chandleresque attempts to inject more drama into a story ("She certainly was pretty. Skin smooth and polished and dark like a butt-worn saddle"; "The waitress, with a grudge of a face and a golden chain cutting into a puffy ankle, complained her way around"; "Some of the curves were so sharp I had to look out the side window to steer through them") the power of which he may not wholly believe in. There are moments when Heat Moon's reportage is just and on target. Then he declines the stroking of ego so characteristic of the cocktail party bore. He declines the impulse to judge others; he goes out into the world bearing no grudge. This is the strength of Gregory, of Augustine, and the lack of it is the occasional failure of a writer like George Bernard Shaw. No message of lasting value will be delivered up through diatribe. The challenge to the writer is to understand, then communicate that understanding to others. One must be open-minded to attain this level. One cannot reach it by writing with a chip on one's shoulder from some personal fortress of defense.

Blue Highways is divided into ten sections, each bearing the name of the direction the author was heading in. For examples of Heat Moon at his best read section four, "South By Southwest," section five, "West By Southwest," and sections eight through ten—"North By Northeast," "East By Northeast," and "Westward." Heat Moon is humbled by the desert's bleak beauty and power and by the reso-

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nance of history along the northeast coast. This humility, imposed by the land and its peculiar gifts, is good for him. He listens well and faithfully records what he hears. Reading these sections is almost like reading the words of another writer than the one who parades his preconceptions through the South and glides through the West and Northwest like a somnolent visitor from an alien planet. Clearly he is not at home in these regions, and he mistakes what he expects to occur for what is actually occurring. But when he stops in Claude Tyler's barbershop in Dime Box, Texas, or discusses the religion of the Hopi Indians with an Indian student in Cedar City, Utah, or records the hard times of the Masucci family in New York, he succeeds in shifting the spotlight of his narrative from himself onto his true subjects. When exploring syruping operations under the tutelage of Tom Hunter in New Hampshire, or riding the trawler *Allison E* off Cape Porpoise, Maine, or spending a day with the elderly pepperpot, Alice Venable Middleton, on Smith Island, Heat Moon gives us memorable characters because he is not defending himself. He is involved in the fact that his characters are simply there, awaiting a gesture of recognition. This is the beauty of the first person narrative—the confession—when it is right. Here is an example from his encounter with Miss Middleton.

> "It was from this window that my husband saw me walking across the ice after being marooned all night in the *Island Belle* when the sound froze over. Caught on the island boat coming home from the Eastern Shore. What a night that was! The Chesapeake, the boat, and us. Nothing lost, not even the *Belle*. When the water opened, they just motored her away."

Advantages, disadvantages. *Blue Highways: A Journey into America* presents images of both. Still, it is a book well worth the reading for anyone interested in the peculiar problems of concept and point of view that accompany the first-person narrative. The glimpses of character which the book offers are glimpses into ourselves. *Blue Highways* has much to teach us about the travelogue that is confession; it also has much to reveal about the way we ought to perceive and about the dangers of faulty perception.

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